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"HAVE ONE? YOU SMOKE, I PRESUME?"

A WILLFUL WIFE; Or, WHICH WAS TO BLAME?

BY LILLIAN LOVEJOY.

CHAPTER I.

QUITE A VIXEN.

"HAVE you ordered the carriage, James?"

"Yes, Clara; and it will be round in a few minutes. I hope that little Coral will be to us what her mother was before *he* came and took her away from the old home," replied James Elthorp, with an audible sigh, which was echoed by the lady, who said, "I sincerely trust she may, for we are very lonely, you and I, when Pierce is at college. I feel sure I shall love her precious little motherless girl. I long to see her; she's sure to be like

her dear mother, with her deep, laughing blue eyes and sunny hair, and her merry laugh. It seems only yesterday that I was listening to her, as she would say, coaxingly, 'Darling old goody, don't be angry with Effie; she is so sorry and will never offend again—not till the next time'—and then vanish like a sunbeam before I could catch her. And now she lies far away from those who loved her so dearly!"

And the tears dropped gently on the rosebud she was working on a satin screen, as she sat conjuring up days that had passed, and the image of the dear one who had never been forgotten, but whose memory would last as the sweet perfume of a faded rose.

James Elthorp left the room to drive to the station, not caring to remain to listen to his sister's retrospections, his wounds being too deep to bear probing even by her from whom he had never been separated since their childhood.

She had remained with him during his short wedded life, and when his young wife had drooped and died, took little Pierce, and became a second mother to the boy, sacrificing herself lovingly and faithfully, and refusing many brilliant offers of marriage.

She and her brother had loved the gentle but willful Effie, who had married against their wishes, sacrificing herself for love, and accompanying her husband south only to die, and to be buried beside him—victims to that fell scourge, yellow fever—in a quiet churchyard in Cuba, under the shade of palm trees, leaving an only child to their care.

Many a gentle sigh did Miss Elthorp heave as she sat in the stately drawing-room, conjuring up pictures of the child who was coming home to the sheltering roof of Elthorp, to take the place of her dear mother, and to bring sunshine into hearts that were sorrowing for the lost one.

She looked round with an expression of pride at the magnificence of the apartment, and thanked Heaven that the little orphan would have every comfort and luxury to console her in her bereavement.

The room was a very cheerful one, with large windows opening into the garden, and looking out on the broad emerald expanse of lawn, bordered with glowing, starry flowerbeds, and several fine old trees.

The soft summer breeze waved the zephyr lace and stiff brocade curtains about, which were tied back with massive bullion cord tassels, and swept the floor in graceful folds, like fretted foam cresting green billows.

Costly jars held choice flowers and exotics, which emitted a delicious perfume, that stole upon the senses, steeping them in dreamy languor on this hot, sultry July day.

Putting aside her embroidery, Miss Elthorp rose and approached the windows, from which a delightful view of a lovely landscape presented itself; country roads, with high, green banks on either side, crowned with hedges of locust and honeysuckle, and rich the whole way down with starry flowers and tangled luxuriance of waving ferns, tall, flowering grasses, and various large-leaved plants that gave an almost tropical effect to the vegetation.

"Let me see," she murmured, as she fanned herself with a bird of paradise fan; "Coral must be quite ten years old. How the time has passed! It seems but yesterday that her dear mother stood here and told me the sweet secret which brought rosy blushes to her gentle face. Oh, my darling! my sweet sister! how I loved you and begrudged you the happiness which caused you to share your heart's affections with another! Poor lost Effie!"

The sound of carriage-wheels broke her reverie; and, looking along the drive, she saw a bare, black head and a quaint, old-fashioned, but childish face thrust out of the window, with a pair of roving eyes drinking in the scene.

"It is surely Coral!" she exclaimed, excitedly, as she flew to the door to welcome the little stranger; and in her impatience rushed out, and, seizing the little girl, smothered her with kisses, receiving in return angry remonstrances, accompanied by frantic efforts to release herself.

James looked rather uncomfortable and perplexed, while the nurse, a quadroon of more than ordinary intelligence, addressed some words to her fractious charge.

"Don't be angry with aunt Clare," Miss Elthorp pleaded, as she placed the refractory Coral on her feet. "We must be great friends, you know, my pet!"

Pushing the gentle creature from her with all her might, the little girl cried, with blazing eyes:

"Go away, nasty woman! You make Coral hot! I don't like you, and I want to go back to the big ship and see the water!"

Leading her into the drawing-room, she seated her on her lap, and gazed at the little, spiteful face with a pained expression of disappointment, for she was not a bit like her mother, and, beyond a pair of large, dark eyes, there was nothing to redeem a single feature.

Her complexion was swarthy; a mouth large, with pouting, vermilion lips; a shock head of blue-black hair, and a little figure all angles.

James, in his courtly way, took the girl's brown hand, and said:

"Welcome home, dear Coral! This lady is your aunt Clara, and I am your uncle. You have heard papa and mamma speak of us, surely?"

Her only reply was a grimace as she sidled down. In running to the nurse, she fell over a footstool; and although not hurt, she began to shriek with rage, and catching up the offending stool, threw it with all her force across the room, narrowly missing Mr. Elthorp's legs, who jumped aside only in time, and it crashed through a glass panel of one of the cabinets.

Having given vent to her temper in this heroic way, she hid behind her nurse, and amused herself in peeping round and making the ugliest faces imaginable at her relatives, who looked at each other in perplexity.

Approaching his sister, James said, in an undertone: "What do you think of her, Clara? She is not so gentle or tractable as we imagined, eh?"

"Oh, brother, brother," the poor lady exclaimed, taking his hand, "I'm so miserable! The dear little thing won't say a word to me, and will hardly let me touch her! She seems to have taken a most extraordinary dislike to me. It is dreadful, and I wanted to love her so!"

And she sobbed over her disappointed hopes.

At this moment, Coral shouted, in a tone of terror: "Here's a boy!" and stared with her wild eyes at Pierce Elthorp, who, having caught sight of the new-comers, hastened through the casement window, with a fish-basket slung over his shoulder.

There was certainly nothing in the lad's appearance to cause any one alarm, for Nature had been most lavish in her gifts of personal attractions. Fair, with flaxen hair curling in waves over a fine intellectual forehead; brown, fearless, honest eyes; limbs supple and straight; figure giving promise of developing into manly symmetry—and you have a picture of an American youth that any father or mother might well be proud of.

Coral had entirely disappeared behind her human rampart, eliciting from Pierce the question: "Where is my little cousin? I saw her face through the window; and, I say, hasn't there been a smash? Who did it, papa?"

Peeping round, Coral cried, defiantly: "I did, boy! I hate you!"

And then the weird little spiteful face hid itself; and the poor nurse made a grimace of pain, for she had received a severe pinch.

Going toward her place of concealment, he said, coaxingly: "Come, cousin, won't you kiss me, and let me look at you? See, I

have such a lot of pretty fish to show you; and when we are good friends you and I will go fishing together."

To coax her out, he held the fish-basket close to where he could perceive a little brown hand clinched viciously; when, rushing out, she snatched the basket out of his hand, and threw its slippery contents over the floor, and clapped her hands and shrieked with delight at sight of the struggling fish and eels, which latter glided about like so many serpents.

"Oh, nurse, look at the snakes and the pretty fish that nasty boy has brought! Come, let us catch them, and put the poor things to bed!"

While Pierce stood ruefully, and her uncle and aunt were quite aghast at the mischief this elf had created, she caught a perch, which pricked her finger with its spiky fin, and slipped out of her hand; whereupon she commenced to jump upon the offender, giving vent to her rage in English and Creole-French, looking like a little demon, with flashing eyes, disordered hair, and passionate face, her whole frame literally quivering with rage.

Snatching her up, the nurse carried her out into the corridor. She struggled and screamed lustily, and slapped the poor woman's face unmercifully.

James coughed nervously, and looked at his sister, who said nothing, but sat in a state of mental excitement bordering on frenzy, fanning herself.

"She wants a good thrashing," blurted out Pierce. "She's a regular little cub, and wants it taken out of her—little spitfire!"

Coral's screams ceased suddenly, and she exclaimed, in a voice hoarse with passion, "I hate you, nasty white boy! You shall not be my cousin. That wicked old man is ugly. The lady isn't as nice as my mamma, and I won't stop here to be teased. Why isn't there any nice black people? I like them. They give me sweetmeats, and let me smoke their hubble-bubbles."

Holding up her hands in horror, Miss Elthorp exclaimed, "Brother, did you ever hear anything so dreadful? Why, the child actually smokes! What are we to do with her?"

"Pack her off to some school at once, or the house will be wrecked, and the whole place demoralized. She's made a pretty bother already. But there! I declare I ought to be ashamed of myself, Clara, for being cross with poor Effie's child before she has been in the house an hour. She may break everything if she likes; but I won't be angry with her again."

While Pierce replaced the fish in his

basket, grumbling over the mess the "little monkey" had made, his aunt went to Coral, and managed to soothe her into a state of obedience, simply because she was exhausted, and could not gather strength enough for another battle; and, to the great relief of everybody, she allowed herself to be carried up-stairs and laid in her bed, on which she sunk to sleep, while her aunt sat beside her, forming plans for her reformation.

A few hours later she stole down-stairs during the nurse's absence, and seeing the door of a conservatory open, entered, and was soon reveling with delight in this floral treasure-house.

Here she was found by Pierce, who stole in softly, and could hardly believe that she was the same child of a few hours ago. Her face wore a softened expression, and her eyes were feasting themselves upon a cluster of gorgeous crimson azaleas.

Plucking a spray from the plant, he offered it to her, saying, "Coral, will you have these?"

"Yes," she replied, as she snatched them somewhat rudely out of his hand, but smiling her thanks. "I love flowers, boy; and Coral won't call you nasty if you give her plenty!"

She at once buried her little brown face in the glorious flowers, and seemed lost to his presence in the great delight she experienced.

Stealing closer to him, she asked, "Did you bring these in a big ship for me, boy? My garden had plenty. Once a great big cobra wanted to steal them, but Pompey killed it with a big stick."

Then, before he could reply, she asked another question with earnest abruptness.

"Boy, can you ride?"

"Horses, do you mean, Coral?"

"Yes, you great stupid! of course."

"I can. We have some ponies in the meadow; would you like to come with me to see them?"

"Yes; come on! Can you run? Boys are good for nothing except to tease girls!"

He said nothing in reply to this contemptuous remark, but thought that she was one of the rudest young ladies he had ever met or spoken to, and also one of the plainest.

As soon as they were outside in the grounds, she cried, "Now, then, boy, I'll race you to that big tree! Start fair!—off!"

To humor her, he began to run, gently at first; but it was all he could do at last to keep pace with the fleet-footed elfin, who made the race a neck-and-neck affair, and was not so blown at the finish as he was.

"This beats all!" he thought. "I wonder

what she will be up to next? If she were not so rude, she would be rather jolly."

Close by was a fine winter apple-tree, full of fruit; and to his astonishment she ran to it, and began climbing up it, and with the agility of a monkey, laughing gleefully as she reached the branches, and making grimaces at him in reply to his appeals to come down.

"Uncle will be so angry," he said, at last, "if you pick those apples. Come down, like a good girl!"

"Sha'n't, boy! Go away, or I'll pelt you! I always do as I like! How dare you speak to me?"

This question was accompanied by an apple, which struck Pierce on the cheek, and made it smart.

"You great, rude tomboy!" he shouted, wrathfully; "you ought to be ashamed of yourself, you—"

But his remarks were cut short by his receiving a blow from another apple right on the tip of his nose; and then commenced quite a shower of apple-pellets, she laughing heartily, and he trying to dodge the missiles, though ineffectually, for her aim was very accurate.

In a perfect rage now, he cried:

"If you were a boy, I would thrash you, Coral! Come down this instant, or I will fetch my father!"

"Don't care, you nasty, spiteful boy! Get away, or I'll come down and bite you, like I do nurse when she's naughty! See, I've got sharp teeth!"

And she opened her mouth, disclosing two rows of these offensive weapons, much to his disgust.

He turned away, determined to bring her to justice, and grumbled all the way along at having such a tiresome cousin thrust upon him.

"Tell-tale tit! — cry-baby! — long-eared monkey! Go away; Coral don't want you."

She tasted an apple, and not finding it to her liking, threw it away, and descended the tree, there being no further fun for her now that Pierce had been driven off.

She espied the meadow, where two young thoroughbred colts were grazing peacefully enough, little dreaming that a mischievous sprite was approaching to invade the privacy of their domain.

Coral clambered over the fence, and selecting the strongest of the two, caught hold of its mane, and was soon seated astride upon its back, urging it, with heels, and voice, and hands, into a gallop, in which she succeeded just as her uncle and Pierce appeared in sight, with Miss Elthorp bringing up the rear.

"The dear child will be killed, brother," exclaimed Miss Elthorp, in terror. "What shall we do? How dreadful! Look at her laughing! I am sure she must be mad! Oh, dear, oh, dear! Now there's the other pony galloping too. Make haste, James, and save her!"

But Coral was in no danger, and was enjoying herself to her heart's content. Her face beamed with pleasure, and her eyes danced with fun, while she sat as steady as a rock, her figure a little bent, and her bare legs dangling like brown saplings, and her hair streaming down her back like a mane.

"Coral, my love!" said her aunt, persuasively, "come to me, dear; I have such pretty things to show you."

"Go away!" shouted the rebel, as she sped on her wild career, round and round the field: both colts galloping their hardest, and evidently enjoying the sport as much as she did.

In vain Mr. Elthorp exhausted all his stock of coaxing. She was obdurate, and would not be charmed from her position, much to his annoyance and his sister's alarm.

"I will see what I can do," cried Pierce, as he ran back to the house, and gathering some flowers from the conservatory, returned with them in breathless haste, saying, as he held them up to her view, "See, Coral, there are more pretty flowers for you; won't you come and take them?"

"Wait a minute, boy, I'll come. Why don't you ride the other pony? I'll teach you."

Mr. Elthorp was fain to smile at this rebellious niece, who had come all the way from Cuba to tease and worry the whole household.

At last she alighted, and climbing the fence, took the flowers, but refused to be caught in her aunt's arms, darting away from her like a sunbeam, and running to her nurse to show her the flowers.

But another severe trial was in store for Miss Elthorp's already outraged relatives, and one far worse than any that had happened yet.

The bell rung for dinner. The household were to dine *en famille*, no guests being present, and Coral, looking neat, but not at all prepossessing, was seated next to her aunt, her nurse standing behind her chair to fan her with an enormous fan, looking at her troublesome mistress with all the solicitude and tenderness of a mother, although she bore about her person convincing proofs that she was not beloved in return.

Mr. Elthorp, with grave mien and dignified manner, began to say grace, when, turning to the portly butler, Coral said, pettishly:

"Fat man, where's my sweet potato and hoe-cake?"

Mr. Elthorp coughed nervously and looked askance at the questioner, while Miss Elthorp upraised her hand, and said, admonishingly:

"Hush, Coral!"

And the butler, not liking the allusion to his obesity, looked red and confused, and glared surreptitiously at the audacious child, whose conduct was certainly very trying to one's temper and patience, as no one could forecast what would happen next.

As her imperious demand was not instantly complied with, she kicked and pushed, and at last swept a dish of savory omelettes off the table, the unfortunate dish being accompanied by glasses, knives, forks, and a cruet, which, in its fall, let loose the top of the pepper-caster, the contents of which floated about the room, and soon made everybody uncomfortable, Mr. Elthorp being attacked by a fit of sneezing, which soon also affected the others, though in a lesser degree.

It ended in her being taken from the table by main force, and certainly no one was sorry when the door closed upon her impish face and struggling form.

A council of war was held, and James strongly advocated that the dreadful child should be sent to school forthwith; but his more tender-hearted sister pleaded for yet another chance, promising, with many forebodings of failure, that she would undertake to reduce the rude, refractory child to obedience.

But the climax was reached next morning.

Among Coral's belongings was a pet monkey, which she had named Sitaun (devil), and the creature being a great pet of hers she smuggled it into her room and allowed it to share her bed.

Eager to salute the sleeping innocent, Miss Elthorp stole noiselessly into the chamber at early morn, and, stooping over the sleeping child, was horrified to see the grinning face of the monkey pop up like a jack-in-a-box, and to feel a hairy paw clutch her nose in play.

Shriek after shriek resounded through the mansion, and Miss Elthorp was taken from the room in strong hysterics.

This decided Coral's fate, and within a week she was sent to New York to school, much to the relief of everybody, even to that of Pierce, who, full of refinement himself, had imbibed a strong prejudice against his uncouth cousin, whose elfish appearance further increased his distaste.

CHAPTER II.

A SOLEMN BRIDAL.

SEVEN years have elapsed since Coral was first introduced to the reader. Uneventful years these, with nothing of more than passing interest to recommend them to notice.

Pierce Elthorp was studying at Harvard, and gave great promise of becoming a thorough scholarly man, of refined tastes and of staid manner, capable, however, of great and absorbing passion when once the phlegmatic crust of his nature was broken through.

All this time he had seen very little of Coral, with whom he corresponded but seldom, and for whom, in a lesser degree, there existed in his mind the same distaste he had felt for her that first week of their meeting.

A sad blow was about to fall upon the house of Elthorp. Mr. Elthorp, its head, was stricken with a fatal illness, and a hasty summons was dispatched to his son to attend his dying bed.

Coral was also sent for to meet her uncle before he went on that last journey—that bourn whence no traveler returns.

A silence as of death had crept into the house, where servants moved noiselessly about and spoke with bated breath, as if paying awed homage to that all-conquering king, death, whose sable scepter had been extended over Elthorp, and who defied human skill to snatch the victim from his icy grasp.

Even nature was in keeping with the sad scene—the approaching dissolution of body and soul; for the trees were bare and the wind moaned and wailed, and scattered the withered leaves about, its chilly breath making the birds shiver; and proclaimed that winter, that fell destroyer, who dooms inanimate nature to death, was at hand.

In a spacious chamber Mr. Elthorp lay upon a couch, his head propped with pillows, his face wan and pinched with suffering, and blanched to the whiteness of the snowy linen.

"I can think of nothing better," he said to his sister. "Coral will find not only a husband but a friend in Pierce, and their united fortunes will enable them to uphold the dignity of the name of Elthorp."

"But, brother, dear, do you think it would be quite wise to influence such a boy and girl to take a final step which might be productive of unhappiness? Pierce has evinced anything but warm affection for his cousin, and she is but a child still, although greatly improved by education and judicious training."

"It was her mother's dying wish, Clara, as it is mine also. If Pierce says no, I will not attempt to force; but it would make me

happy to see them man and wife before I depart this life."

"Perhaps you are right, dear brother!" she said, with a sigh. "But I wish I was going instead of you, for you are more needed on earth than I, who am but a weak woman, unable to guide or direct the strong, willful natures of youth."

The sound of carriage-wheels put an end to this strange conversation, and Pierce Elthorp was soon kneeling beside his father, whose hand rested lovingly on his bowed head with pride as he saw how much his boy had improved.

When the young man's emotion had subsided, his father beckoned him to a chair, and taking his hand, which was warm with health and strength, in his own clammy grasp, he said:

"My son, I have a request to make of you, and if you can comply with it I shall die happy."

"Dear father," he replied, "whatever it is, it shall be carried out; but perhaps you may yet be spared to us. Why should you leave us? It will break my heart, for you have been both father and mother to me ever since *she* died, and left me a helpless infant on your hands! Would that I could die for you, my father! Oh, my father!"

And he lifted up his voice and wept such tears as only strong men can shed, and which come from the very soul itself, racking the frame with agony, and scorching the brain, as if seared with hot iron.

"My sands are running out fast, Pierce, and we must submit, we who have to go, and you who remain, to the decrees of nature."

Miss Elthorp had stolen softly from the room, leaving these two to open their hearts to each other in a way they had never done before. It is strange how secrets of love and affection, a whole treasure-house of devotion, is laid bare at such times as these.

Mr. Elthorp had never been very demonstrative in his affection to his son, and although invariably kind, had been also a little stern, fearing lest too great a display of affection might make the lad a milksop.

But now that the hour of parting was at hand, he showed him his whole heart, and Pierce saw what depths of love were there, and what a true friend he had been to him throughout his life, which was now blossoming into the flower of manhood, and was to bear fruit—perchance grapes or thistles.

After a silent pause, during which the father scanned his son's face narrowly, as if to search his inmost heart and the workings of his mind—to plumb, as it were, the springs of obedience to his parental will, he said: "Coral is an orphan, my sister's child, and

your cousin. It is the dearest wish of my heart to see you united to her before I die. She is wealthy, and, although a little wayward and headstrong, is a good girl, and would make you an excellent wife."

"Marry Coral!" exclaimed Pierce, with a start and a shudder of aversion.

"Yes, I have sent for her, and wish the ceremony to take place in this room, in my presence. Her mother wished it, and I approve. Speak, boy, and tell me if I may rely upon your loving acquiescence!"

But Pierce was too dazed by the unexpected request to be able for the moment to reply.

Had his father asked him to do the hardest thing possible, to travel round the earth in search of the philosopher's stone, or to do any other such Quixotic thing, he could not have been more surprised and astonished than he was by the proposal to make Coral his wife; to be her companion in the years to come; to give up his very life to her; to surrender himself completely, as a devoted husband should; and to swear to love and cherish her in sickness and in health, in poverty, in wealth, until death should dissolve the compact.

No thought of love had as yet entered his heart for a single being outside the circle of his home. He was cold, almost disdainful, to the women he met, because they could not touch his heart; and to Coral he was affectionate only conventionally, because she was his cousin, and he had to obey the unwritten laws of society, which are as unalterable as those of the Medes and Persians.

He conjured up the picture of Coral before his mind's eye as he had first seen her, with her spiteful dark face, angry eyes, and shrieking, turbulent voice—a picture which had never lost its impression through intervening years—and he could not bring to his recollection a single good point in her favor.

And yet he was asked to sacrifice himself for her upon the altar of family convenience; to give up the freedom so sweet to a young man just entering upon life, with the world at his feet, and brilliant prospects to tempt him on to win fame and distinction.

But yet filial obedience demanded that he should comply, and he said:

"Your wish, dear father, shall be sacred to me. I can only hope that the matter will turn out as happily as you could desire."

Perceiving that there was no warmth in his tone, and that he spoke coldly, Mr. Elthorp said:

"Pierce, is there any reason why you should not marry Coral? Are your affections engaged elsewhere? Pardon the question; but I do not wish you to prove false to

love's instinct, or to break vows which have been made to another."

"There is nothing, dear father; but I must tell you truthfully that I do not love my cousin."

"Neither did I your mother at first; but it grew upon me, as it will upon you, Pierce. Coral is much improved, and, take my word for it, you will yet be proud of her. She is little more than a hoyden now, with both mind and body unformed, undeveloped; but I can see in her traces of rare beauty and signs of a loving heart, which, if subdued by love, would prove capable of the greatest devotion. She is an uncut diamond, wanting but the polish which will come from society to turn out a gem of the first water."

"I would, dear father, that you should ask of me anything but this sacrifice. My future happiness is at stake, and in my cousin I can see nothing to love or admire. She is volatile, passionate, impulsive, and has every trait that I dislike—nay, detest."

"You, my dear boy, are prejudiced. The girl is like an untrained filly that has never felt the curbing influence of love or affection. Remember, too, that she was born under a Southern sun, and cannot possibly be as cold and phlegmatic as some of our Northern girls are. Of course, I do not wish you to make this sacrifice blindly. In a few years she will develop into a beautiful woman, and will have men at her feet; for, in addition to great promise of beauty, she possesses immense wealth, and will be a rare prize to win. I am not sordid or mercenary in my views for your welfare; but my dearest wish is to see you Coral's husband, and as I lie here dying something tells me it will conduce to your future happiness, or, believe me, my dear son, I would not urge this step upon you at a time when I am about to leave you forever."

"Father, say no more; I will obey you. Will that please you?" bending over the sufferer's couch and kissing the cold forehead, damp with the dews of death that stole over his face.

A pleased smile broke over his countenance as he said feebly, the effort of talking having been almost too much for his waning strength, "Dear Pierce, you have made me very happy, and I pray Heaven to bless you both. The hopes of our houses are centered in you. Remember that. And you must strive to keep its old prestige untarnished."

"I will, dear father. I will try my utmost."

And father and son clasped hands, when a silence ensued which was unbroken save by the low murmur of an earnest prayer from the dying man.

Coral, during the interview between father and son, was pacing the drawing-room like a caged panther, having only arrived at Elthorp within the hour, uttering impatient exclamations over the delay in being admitted to the presence of her uncle.

"Why doesn't he make haste? He is so slow! And, oh, my heart is sore at the thought of his having the first place! Oh, my dear, dear uncle, can nothing save you? Why am I so helpless, I who love you so dearly, and would die if it would save you?"

"Coral, my darling," her aunt said, "try and be calm! Remember that Pierce has only just come, and that your dear uncle has much to talk to him about that will prove of interest to you eventually. Come here, child! You will soon be a woman now. Have you ever thought of marriage?"

"Marriage?—no, aunt. Why should I? I dislike men. They are so selfish. I never saw a man that I thought worthy of the name except my dear father and uncle; and now he is about to leave me. Oh, why should all I love be snatched from me?—mother, father, and now him who has been so loving, so kind to me—me, a wayward, good-for-nothing girl!"

"Come, come, Coral, love! No repining! Submit to the decrees of fate! Tell me, do you love your cousin Pierce?"

"Yes, a little; but he writes such stupid letters about propriety and so on, and never says anything loving or kind, like you and dear uncle."

"But he is so much younger, and perhaps sees you in a different light to what we do, you know."

"But why should he set himself up as my mentor? He is but a very little older than I, and cannot be so wonderfully wise, although he has always pretended to be ever since I can remember him."

"You will think better of him when you see more of him; he is very lovable, and kindness itself; and I think there is no one to equal him." Then seeing a frown on Coral's face, caused by her praises of Pierce, she hastened to add, "Just as in my opinion there is no one half so good as you, my darling, in spite of your little impetuous ways. Come, kiss me, and promise to be the best of friends with your cousin, and do all you can to console him in his coming sorrow."

Further conversation was interrupted by the entrance of Pierce, who came forward and shook hands with Coral, and pressed his lips to her forehead with a cold courtesy that stung her, saying:

"Dear cousin, my father would like to see you now; come."

This, as he offered her his arm, and con-

ducted her into the sick-chamber, where the sight of her uncle—his face pale, his eyes dim, and his whole appearance so changed that she hardly knew him—gave her such a shock that she burst into tears and was subdued, all her impatience and impetuosity vanishing before the presence of the grim, mysterious enemy men call death.

"Is that you, Coral?" asked her uncle, putting out his hand to feel for her, his eyesight having almost failed him. "Don't cry, child. You have been a comfort to me, my dear, and I hope you and Pierce will keep up the credit of the old house when I am gone."

"Dear uncle, if you leave me," she sobbed, "I shall not live: you and aunt are the only two persons in all the world who understand me, or can sympathize with my failings. Oh, don't go and leave poor Coral all alone in the world!"

This as she caught his hand, and kissed it passionately, bedewing it with her tears, as Pierce, greatly moved by her outburst of sorrow, turned and left the room, half-reconciled to the thought of making her his wife; for, after all, he saw she had a heart that could feel.

"Coral," said her uncle, "I want to say a few words on a subject very dear to my heart, and which concerns the future of yourself and Pierce. Do you think you could love him and become his wife?"

"Pierce's wife, uncle?" she stammered.

"Yes; you will want a protector, and will find one in him, child."

"But perhaps he does not love me as I wish to be loved, uncle! He appears so cold, and treats me with a studied courtesy I cannot bear."

"Child, you are yet too young to understand what is best for you. Pierce cannot help loving you. He is willing to make you his wife; and surely, Coral, you could not wish for a better husband than my son. Besides, your dear mother wished this marriage to take place. Your fortune will be settled on yourself, and you will live at dear old Elthorp, and think sometimes of your poor old uncle, who loved you both so well. Had I been spared to live a few years longer, I should not have mooted the subject until you had both learned to love each other; but now, in the presence of death, I am compelled to speak, or forever hold my tongue."

Impressed by the solemnity of his words and the revelation of her mother's wish, heard for the first time, she said, gently:

"Dear uncle, I will obey you and my dear mother in this; but, oh, I should have liked to be free to know my own heart, for indeed I feel no love for any man, and perhaps it is wrong to marry without loving. I am but

a child, and it may be in years to come, Pierce will blame me for agreeing to this. His nature and mine are so unlike. I am a madcap, and suppose I shall always continue one. But if I marry him, I shall try to be less willful, for your sake, and a good wife to him."

"God bless you for those words, my dear child! I shall die happy! And now leave me; I feel I can sleep."

CHAPTER III.

STRANGE NUPTIALS.

It was evening, and the autumn gloaming was shrouded in misty rain, which swept against the window-panes and on the roof, while the wind whistled, and anon wailed plaintively, as if moaning the departure of summer.

And in that sick-chamber, in the grand old mansion of Elthorp, a strange scene was being enacted.

A bride and bridegroom stood near the bedside of the dying, and a minister, feeling the solemnity of the occasion, was reading the marriage-service in accents awed by the awful presence of death.

The responses were said softly, as if to avoid disturbing the sufferer, who joined in the prayers, and whose "Amen!" was fervent if uttered feebly.

Coral was pale, but self-possessed, and her glorious eyes shone like jewels in the dim religious light pervading the room.

She looked like a white-robed statue, standing there so motionless—the gentle heaving of her bosom and the soft murmuring of her voice being the only indications that she was a sentient being—that she was not marble, but flesh and blood, endowed with passions—a woman, standing upon the threshold of a new life, with its attendant responsibilities, its temptations and trials, its triumphs and failures, all to come.

Her white drapery clung around her slim, reed-like figure not ungracefully, and her blue-black hair, dark as the raven's wing, shone with additional luster through the fleecy texture of the bridal veil which fell to her feet.

Her only ornament was a spray of white azaleas which nestled in her bosom, their starry gleam relieving somewhat the paleness of her face and the dead white of the lace dress.

No one who saw that delicate, fragile girl would dream that under her quiet exterior there lay powerful impulses that were to color her whole future, for good or evil, or that she was a passion-flower transplanted from the sunny South to bloom or wither amid the cold, inhospitable climate of New

England; or whether the man who stood at her side would have the power to sway her heart and mold her to his will.

The benediction was given, and Pierce Elthorp and Coral were man and wife, without a word of love having passed between them.

Taking a hand of each, the dying man, over whose eyes the glaze of dissolution was fast overspreading, murmured a blessing, and with a gentle sigh, and a flickering smile of happiness on his face, breathed his last.

The funeral is over and Pierce Elthorp is talking quietly and gravely to his girl-wife, and that in name only.

"You will return to New York to-night, Coral, to finish your education. I shall write to you purely on business matters. You are too sensible not to know that we did not marry for love. I have expectations of obtaining a diplomatic post abroad; you are my ward as well as my wife, and may rely upon my looking well after your interests. You will be ready to start within the hour, please. It will just give you time to catch the night Express."

"Pierce," she said, you must not try to force my inclinations or bend my will to yours. I am passionate, willful, and shall not be dictated to in this cruel way! What if I said I will not go? But have no fear. I promised your father to curb my temper, and for his sake, and for that of my pride, I shall return to school, but not simply because you demand it."

"Coral, this to me?" he said, turning pale with anger.

"Yes, Pierce! Why not to you? Is it kind so soon after the loss we have both endured to send me away from Elthorp? Cannot you see that I want a little time in which to mourn for our dead?"

"Sentiment, Coral, does no good. You can work and study, and it will help to lessen your grief. I shall be obeyed!"

"Obeyed!" she said, scornfully, as she took the ring off her finger and threw it at his feet. "I will not wear the badge of slavery any longer! Take it; it has given me no pleasure to wear it!"

"Coral, remember your promise to my father!" he said, coldly, as he stooped and picked up the ring. "You will wear this as my wife, and I claim your obedience. How are you to take your place as mistress of Elthorp, if you are not fitted for the position? Surely you would like to do credit to yourself and me? I will leave you to reflect upon the matter. When you have come to your senses you will find me in the library."

He turned away in anger, leaving her with a heart that felt justly indignant to-

ward a husband that could thus treat her, and who had not even kissed her but merely saluted her cheek icily.

"He hates me!" she thought. "How foolish I was to consent to marry him and how wrong of him to have accepted the sacrifice! But I will not show him that I feel hurt; he shall never have that satisfaction."

The bitterness of this trial, the humiliation of it all, wounded her heart sorely, and made a woman of her before her time.

This cold, haughty man little dreamt of the germs of pride and revenge he was sowing in the girl's heart, or he would not have acted thus.

He bade her good-by at the station, and raised his hat ceremoniously as the train steamed out with Coral and her faithful old nurse Dinah.

In years to come, when he sighed in vain for one look of love, he remembered the wistful face and large haunting eyes of his girl-wife as she leaned out of the window, with a bursting heart, that could have loved him then so dearly if his prejudices had not blinded him to her worth.

"Coral, sun of my life, why do you weep for him? He is like de snow, an' his coldness will freeze your heart!" said the quadroon, as she drew Coral's head down to her breast and tried to soothe her grief.

"My tears, Dinah, are not for him, but for myself, because I have been a weak fool to marry such a proud man. But he shall not break my heart; no, I shall live to be avenged!"

"Yes; an' Dinah who loves you better dan life, will nebber leave you. Some day he will grovel at your feet for a smile. You will be a queen among women!"

And the woman's eyes flashed as she looked at the weeping girl to whom she had been a mother; faithful even unto death, willing to lay down her very life for her dear sake.

Coral was back again at Madame Simon's establishment in New York, but her heart was not so light as of old, for she mourned truly the loss of her best friend, her late uncle, who had always been to her kindness itself, and never denied her anything in reason.

Somehow, the young feel sorrow more acutely than their seniors, because their sensibilities have not been blunted by contact with a cold, heartless, cynical world, but are fresh and open, like the petals of flowers, which, later on, are closed in by the artificial covering which care, and sorrow, and struggles weave round the heart.

She could not understand why her husband should not wish to have her with him as his companion and friend; she had a

shrewd suspicion that he could do more to form her character by kind, loving words than any one else.

"Finish my education, indeed!" she said, with a toss of her head, as she sat in her room, reading a letter she had just received from Pierce Elthorp. "He is always harping on that theme, and it gets wearisome. I can sing, dance, play, know several languages, and have had deportment dinged into me for several years, until I can now enter and leave a room gracefully, without knocking over chairs, or stumbling over my train, or doing anything *outré*. What more does he want, unless, indeed, he intends me to be a professor? A pretty husband he is, to keep his wife at school! I am past seventeen, am in long frocks, and am actually Mrs. Elthorp! I declare I have half a mind to run away, and lead him a pretty dance; and I would, too, if it were not for my dear, gentle old love of an aunt, who would break her heart! Even nurse says it is not right, and that I ought to return with her to Cuba. Heigho! what a thing it is to be a married woman and a school-girl at the same time!"

But for all this tirade she kissed the letter, because it came from dear old Elthorp; and then, woman-like, cried over it until it was time for her to dry her eyes and to go to her studies, which were very distasteful to her now.

Before she had removed all traces of tears from her face there came a tap at the door, and a girl of her own age entered, presenting a perfect contrast in appearance to her, being fair as a lily, with rich chestnut hair, *petite* figure of exquisite symmetry; blue eyes of shifty expression, veiled with dark, long lashes that drooped; and the face of an angel, such a one as a Raphael would like to have painted; hands and feet fairy-like in dimensions. Such was Bell Allingham, Coral's dearest friend and school-companion.

But despite her angelic face there was an expression of lurking deceit about the eyes, that gave them a semi-sinister appearance that was repellent until one had become accustomed to her.

"Why, Coral, whatever is the matter? This is the third time I have caught you in tears since your return, and goodness knows how many more lachrymose fits you have indulged in in secret!"

Throwing her arms around her friend's neck, Coral said, "I am very miserable, Bell! My husband is always lecturing me about the proprieties. I don't deserve it, do I, dear? Just read this letter. Not a word of love in it; and signs himself, 'Your true friend!'"

"Why do you submit to it, Coral? You

are a married woman, and can insist on your rights, which are termed conjugal, I think."

"But what can I do?" asked Coral, piteously.

"A lot. Get up a flirtation, and let him hear of it through a well-meaning friend. He would be sure to take you away from here then. But what is this very strange husband of yours like? Old, gouty, jealous, exacting—a regular modern Bluebeard? I have noticed, as others have also, that madame never loses sight of you now, but plays the part of duenna to perfection—at his instigation, I suppose."

"He is quite the reverse of the picture you have drawn of him, Bell. He is young, very handsome, kind, but does not love me, I fear. Now you know all. He is coming here soon, and, if you like, I will introduce you to him."

"Perhaps I shall fall in love with this handsome husband of yours, and take him off your hands!" she remarked, with a laugh. "But if I were you, I would outrage his sense of propriety in every way, and show him that I had a will of my own."

"So I do, Bell; but it does no good; it only embitters him the more."

"All the better. I have read somewhere that anger, like fire, thaws ice. At all events, it would show him that you had taken your education into your own hands."

"Ah, it is easy to talk; but when a husband treats your ebullitions of temper with cold disdain, somehow one gets tired of the experiment."

"You are a regular little simpleton, and quite deserve to be treated as you are! Now, take my advice, and when he comes, sit awkwardly; act the hoyden; and if he does not like light reading, ask his opinion about one of the French novels of our secret library. Pretend you smoke cigarettes, and offer him your box. Sing snatches of song from the latest opera bouffe. Tell him you think of taking lessons in stage-dancing, and ask him if there is any harm in a lady learning the noble art of self-defense. Rely upon it, he will take you back with him by the next train, and never lose sight of you afterward. The rest will be an easy matter."

"But he has such a horror of any of those things, and I believe that I offended his susceptibilities when I first met him, seven years ago—a wild little madcap from Cuba. To me he has always been cold and grave, but very kind. He means well, I am sure, Bell."

"And he acts the reverse. Pluck up heart, and give my plan a trial. He can't eat you, you know, and you will still be his wife. We will rehearse the part together—I,

the exacting husband; you, the rebellious wife; and I shall yet see you in your proper position."

Coral could have had no worse adviser than Bell; and, although her wild nature longed for an opportunity to bring her husband to his senses, she had a presentiment that the plot would not work well.

But when has youth ever been prudent?—that rarely comes till the hair is threaded with silver, and sometimes not till it is quite gray; to symbolize that the passions have been shrouded with snow, and that the fire is out, and nothing but ashes remain, smoldering, it may be, at times, but never warming into reckless imprudence.

The day arrived at last when Pierce Elthorp was to pay his promised visit to his girl-wife; and, as ill-luck would have it, Coral was not in the best of tempers, for madame had spoken sharply to her about some little fault, and she felt sulky and cross in consequence.

Sometimes the slightest event will give a coloring to one's whole life, diverting it from the broad channel of duty into the narrow streamlets, where shallows, and rocks, and quicksands abound.

Coral had meant to meet her husband in a submissive frame of mind; but this petty annoyance turned her aside from this laudable intention, and she became defiant, would not dress becomingly, or take the slightest pains with her toilette; besides which, the tempter, in the shape of Bell Allingham, was at her elbow urging her to act toward him with flagrant disobedience; when, if she had trusted her own heart, she would have decked herself with smiles, and donned her prettiest costume in honor of the occasion, knowing, as she did, the fastidious tastes of the man she had to meet.

"Mr. Pierce Elthorp, miss," said a footman.

"Tell Mr. Elthorp I shall be with him presently," she said, in a waspish tone, as she went to her mirror, and looked at herself with that spiteful expression her face had worn when she first came to Elthorp.

"I shall do," she exclaimed. "Why should I take pains with myself? He does not care for me, and never will; thinks me a vulgar madcap; I will keep up the character."

When she met her husband, he simply shook hands with her, and saluted her cheek coldly; when, as if prompted by the Evil One himself, she threw her arms around his neck, and kissed him boisterously.

"That's one of the finishing touches to my education," she said. "Perhaps you will become my pupil, and learn how to greet a wife who is not a school-girl. Come, sit by

me, and tell me all the news. First of all, how is aunty? Next, how is dear Elthorp looking? Lastly, how have you been spending *your* time during my absence?"

She placed a chair for him with a loud crash that made him wince, and taking another, seated herself, with her feet, which were not elegantly shod, on a porcelain stove, and tilted her chair with an *abandon* that froze him with aversion; and then, taking out a cigarette-case, said, with nonchalance:

"Have one? You smoke, I presume? Most men do; and ladies too nowadays, especially matrons."

This in a dignified tone that was most exasperating.

"Corall!" he said, coldly.

"Yes, Pierce. What's the matter? Make yourself at home. Come, what can I offer you?—a B. and S. or wine? My pocket-money will run to either, thanks to your liberality, Mr. Elthorp! Have you brought me anything nice? Why don't you speak? You are really very provoking, and unaccustomed evidently to the society of ladies."

Here she gave the chair such a tilt that he was compelled to save her from falling.

"Really, Coral," he said, icily, "you seem to have retrograded. I am very much annoyed at your levity."

"You don't say so! I am at a loss to understand how that can be, as I am now finishing my education, and only require a few more touches to make me perfect. At least, that is what they say here. I don't mean in the school, but outside in the world, where I am much admired as I walk in file with a number of children. 'A cat may look at a king,' you know; and the New York dudes are very gallant, as a rule, to ladies."

He shuddered visibly, and looked angrily at her from out of his brown, grave eyes.

"And this is my wife!" he thought. "Heaven help me! how can I ever tolerate her? She must be crazy, or worse! I really hoped to see an improvement in her; but, alas! she is more rough and hoydenish than ever!"

Pierce was too much of a gentleman to retort in words upon his wife, who certainly was trying her utmost to vex him, and to make herself more objectionable in his eyes than ever.

Her dress was, to say the least, slovenly; and her wealth of raven hair looked tangled and frowsy, for she had intentionally neglected her appearance, and had put on her most ill-fitting dress to meet this severe critic than whom there could not have been a man more fastidious.

Looking at her as she lolled with impertinent indolence in that grand *salon*, with mir-

rors and bullion-fringed curtains and costly carpets; and everything of refinement and elegance, she certainly looked anything, from a servant to an ill-bred *parvenue*, than a lady bearing the name of one of the oldest and proudest of New England families.

Disgusted by her nonchalant disregard of the proprieties, he turned from her with a shrug, indicating that he thought her hopelessly incorrigible, and looked out at the window, which commanded a view of the small but well-kept grounds, and his eyes rested upon Bell Allingham, who seemed to float before him, and looked as if she had just stepped out of a picture with her fair, angelic face and golden-tinted hair. Her *petite*, graceful form and her exquisitely-made toilette were perfect. She was the model of elegance itself. Her face, too, was wreathed with sunny smiles, partly disclosing teeth as white as pearls, and lips from which a bee could have been tempted to extract sweets. A dainty little lady, full of the grace and poetry of motion, a fairy about whom the sunbeams flitted as if wooing her smiles and caressing her soft rounded form.

Before he was aware of it, and while he was contemplating this lovely girl, Coral stood by his side, and in a voice strained by inward passion and resentment at his coldness and treatment of her as a mere school-girl whom he had come to visit and to patronize, said:

"Oh, that is my dearest friend, Bell Allingham. I want to introduce you to her." And before he could reply she tapped at the window in a rude way, as he thought, and beckoned her friend to her, exclaiming, loudly, "Well, Pierce, what are you thinking about that you do not open the casement for my school-chum? If you treat me as a naughty child who has offended you, please show some gallantry to my friend and step down off your pedestal and be something more than marble."

"Good Heavens! What a contrast!" he thought, as Bell tripped in, bringing with her the sweet breath of spring, and that subtle charm of manner which captivated his senses and made him draw comparisons not at all flattering to Coral.

The usual introductory formula was gone through, and the dainty little lady stood before him, her eyes cast shyly down, as she stole furtive glances at this handsome husband of her friend.

She had on a tight-fitting black velvet morning dress that clung to her form as if molded to it, relieved only by rare lace ruchings around the snow-white neck and wrists. Her waist was clasped by a silver zone, in which was fastened a bunch of violets that emitted a sweet perfume, which

stole upon the senses and filled his mind with thoughts and strange longings, which did not escape the sharp glances of his wife, whose eyes were fastened on his with an expression of jealous anger.

"He can admire her," she thought, "and greets her with smiles, while he treats me with studied coldness and politeness.

"I am very happy to meet a friend of Mrs. Elthorp," he said, courteously.

Looking up coyly, with eyes in whose depths there lurked powers of dangerous fascination, she replied, sweetly, her voice being toned to the silver notes of a lute:

"It is very good of you, Mr. Elthorp, to say so; but I did not expect the pleasure of a renewal of a very long friendship with Mrs. Elthorp at school."

This veiled sarcasm did not affect Pierce, who was too charmed with his new acquaintance to notice the pointed allusion to a matter that had filled many with astonishment.

Coral, however, was quick to perceive it, and her temporary resentment against Bell for having captivated her husband vanished like mists before the sun, and she became almost amiable, and joined in the conversation with a vivacity that showed she was possessed of brilliant conversational powers, when she chose to exercise them.

But Pierce did not look for anything that could charm him in his girl-wife, to whom he did not address himself much, but appeared bent upon drawing out the intellectual side of Bell's character.

Presently they were joined by Madame Simon, who could not help seeing how neglectful Coral had been with her toilette, and, as a Frenchwoman could not understand why an American lady of wealth could display such indifference in a matter of such vital importance.

But Coral was an enigma to herself, and, while full of loving impulses, was always acting as if guided by a reckless disregard to the sensibilities of others, particularly of her husband.

A *recherche dejeuner* was served in madame's private drawing-room; but Coral did not enjoy herself, because Pierce wounded her pride by showing more attention to others than to her.

At this critical epoch in her young life she sorely needed a mother's guidance, a heart to confide her sorrows to, a bosom upon which to rest, a matured womanly judgment to appeal to for loving sympathy and advice.

How many a life has been wrecked for the want of this! How many natures, thrown back upon themselves, have been soured and warped and stunted, because the craving for

affection and tender solicitude has not been satisfied!

Having obtained permission from madame, he took the ladies for a drive through the picturesque and romantic Central Park.

It was springtide, and nature, like a lovely maiden, was putting forth virgin charms, all softness and coyness, giving promise of great beauty when flowers would deck her broad bosom, and summer would ripen corn and fruit, and make glad the heart of man.

Trees were putting forth tender buds of vernal green, and birds with their mates sung love-ditties and awoke the echoes of the charming place; and the sun, like a jealous guardian, looked down upon the scene, and with its rays dispelled the lurking frost that lingered as if to blast with its icy touch the delicate foliage and herbage.

Bell Allingham was quite as charmed with Pierce Elthorp as he was with her. Her face was wreathed in sunny smiles, that made her beauty quite dazzling, as she chatted with this grave, proud, haughty man, thawing the ice of his nature by her vivacity and witty sallies; while Coral sat silent, and drank in the beauties of the scene, longing to descend and look for wild flowers, to roam alone, and be soothed and comforted by the voice of nature, which never appealed to her in vain.

Bell was giving a description of the sayings and doings of the Russian Court, at which her father, the Hon. James Allingham was ambassador.

"What an odd coincidence!" remarked Pierce. "I am daily expecting a diplomatic appointment to that Court. I presume you will shortly join your father at St. Petersburg, Miss Allingham?"

Coral said, impulsively, before her husband could reply:

"Any one can go there for me. It would kill me, that land of eternal snow and ice. I long to return to the Sunny South, where the sun warms you into life, and where are rare flowers, and grand trees, and rivers and mountains, that speak to my heart in a voice that fills me with delight. Here, in the North, you are all so cold and frigid, so conventional, that really life is not worth living—at least, that is my opinion."

A slight frown settled on the handsome face of Mr. Elthorp, as he replied, somewhat sternly:

"Your opinions, Coral, are a little too pronounced, and require toning down somewhat. A wife's place is with her husband."

"Then why do you leave me at school, and treat me like a mere child? You seem

to forget that I am a woman now, and that I wish to take my place in society as Mrs. Elthorp."

Bell smiled at this passionate outburst, and enjoyed the little scene, especially as she could perceive that Pierce was very much nettled.

"Mrs. Elthorp, I think it better that we should not discuss the matter further at present," he replied, with freezing politeness. "When you—"

But Coral was not listening to him, for she was watching a gaunt, powerful woman, the wife of some day laborer, as with clinched hands she beat a child unmercifully, uttering fierce oaths at every blow.

Standing up, Coral suddenly leaped out of the carriage, and running forward, interposed between the child and its brutal mother, exclaiming, with eyes that scintillated with wrath, "How dare you ill-use a mere baby, you wretched creature? Strike me, if you will; but you shall not lay another finger on this child!"—snatching the little fellow up in her arms as she spoke, and confronting this virago with a face aflame with anger, and a look of resolution that quite awed the woman.

Pierce alighted, and ordered Coral to put the boy down.

"Really, Coral, this is too unseemly—too unladylike, and tries my patience beyond endurance. Leave such people to settle their own affairs."

Turning upon him, her splendid eyes gleaming with scorn, she exclaimed passionately, "You are a man, and bid me act the coward—you, who would not allow one of your horses or dogs to be brutally treated! And yet this child is to be beaten unmercifully before my very eyes, and you bid me not to interfere because it is unseemly and unladylike! But if I am your wife, I am no slave, Mr. Elthorp, and will not obey you in anything that the dictates of my heart tell me is not right."

"When you are calmer I will reply. Please give the child to its mother, and rejoin Miss Allingham, who must feel shocked, at your strange, impulsive behavior."

"I do not care," Coral replied haughtily. "In this matter I will consult nobody's feelings but my own."

"So it appears," he said ironically; "but has the scene not lasted long enough to please even you, Coral? Perhaps you would like to enact the *role* of a policeman, and take the offender into custody? It would be a fitting sequel, and make you sufficiently notorious to please even your eccentric cravings."

Putting the child down, she placed the contents of her purse in its grimy little hand, and stooping, kissed its tear-stained face, ad-

juring its mother to act more kindly toward it, and then re-entered the carriage and took her seat by her husband's side.

"How different she looks!" thought Bell, as she watched Coral's face and dark eyes, which sparkled like jewels, lighting up the rich olive skin, under which the warm blood of youth surged and throbbed, quite transforming their expression, and making her appear a very Semiramide, an Eastern queen, born to sway the hearts of men, and by her indomitable will to subdue nations.

But Pierce was blinded by deep-rooted prejudice to the regal beauty of this Southern girl-wife; and he fumed and fretted in secret over her delinquencies, seeing only her tall, supple form, her somewhat angular figure, and the sharp curves of that passionate face, a picture that he had first seen in the days of his boyhood, and which had remained fixed indelibly on his brain.

With great tact, Bell Allingham poured oil on the troubled waters, and called up smiles to Coral's face as she mimicked the facial and grotesque contortions of their old dancing-master; and even made Pierce good-tempered again, and quite restored his equanimity.

The girls looked forward with eager pleasure to the approaching visit to the opera, where Pierce was to escort them that evening.

CHAPTER IV.

AN UNLOVED WIFE.

CORAL found it a relief when her husband left her for a short while, for somehow she began to feel *distrain* in his society.

In the solitude of her own chamber she surveyed herself in the mirror, and murmured, "Why am I not as beautiful as Bell? I am dark, and not a bit handsome, and he likes fair women! Ah, me! I ask for bread, and he gives me a stone, and will not see that I could love him dearly—this cold, proud man, with the face of an Adonis but with a heart of marble! Oh, that I resembled you, my darling mother, who was more lovely than even Bell! He would have loved me then, perhaps!"

As she soliloquized, her nurse entered softly; and catching her in tears, drew her head down until it rested in her lap, and smoothing her sable tresses, said, "Pearl ob my life!—Dinah's darlin'! why are you so sad? Tell your own mammy, in whose arms you have rested ever since you came into de world to brighten her life! Tell me, my jewel! what can I do for you? Dinah has only one life, but she will lay it down for her darlin'. Or if any one has offended my treasure, I know of herbs that will kill!"

Coral looked up into the dusky face which brooded over her so lovingly, and said, with an expression of terror, "Hush, Dinah! we are among people who do not understand you. I am sad because he loves me not. Oh, that I were fair, like a lily, with golden hair, and alluring blue eyes, that caress and win men, and do not flash upon them like mine! Is there no potion you can give me to make me look beautiful in *his* eyes?"

Framing the dark, pleading, wistful face in her hands, Dinah gazed intently at each feature, and said, in a trembling voice:

"No, chile, no! You want to look beautiful in *his* eyes—de cold Northern man who owns you. Yes, owns you like de slave my mudder was, an' who would bend you to his wishes as a reed in de wind. W'at does he care for your *beauty*? It matters not to him how you look, but you are his, an' must obey his ebery word. But you *are* beautiful, my chile; a million times more than de girl ob de lily skin, who would level your head to de dust if she could. Dey will find it to their cost some day; others will lub you—will worship you for your beauty, darlin', w'en *she* will be faded an' old. You do not know your power, but you will yet awaken to it, and so will he—your cold, proud husband! He will see you surrounded by worshipers, those who know an' see you for what you are, an' who would gib their libes just to kiss your han'. An' he will *wake* to it, an' it will be too late—Dinah can tell! *Then* you can return him de scorn he now gibs you, an' he will be as helpless in your power as you now are in his. Only wait—time will tell! Dinah speaks de truth to her chile—her beautiful darlin'!"

As Dinah spoke, she listened with awe and something was aroused within her—something womanly that had been sleeping—a power that she possessed, but knew not how to wield—a scepter that would enable her to subdue and conquer, and to make men forget reason, prudence, and, casting everything to the winds, live only for her.

Coral had knelt down a child, impulsive, passionate, but still a child. She rose, a woman in whom the world would see a siren; and woe be to that man over whom she cared to cast her witcheries—he had better never have been born.

"You give me fresh heart, dear mammy," she said; "your words find an echo in my breast, and do not mock me as empty sounds. You tell me I am a child of beauty. I feel, and now know it. Henceforth I will not sue, but command, and will take my place among women, not fearing their rivalry. You have inspired me with an ambition to rule men, and to make them feel that I can mold them to *my* will."

Then turning to her glass, she looked at that emotional face of hers, and wondered why she had not seen in it what Dinah had told her of.

Sullen discontent had fled, and there was a conscious expression of power in her eyes and face that made her look regal and beautiful—a beauty all its own, enhanced by those full, rich, and exquisitely molded vermilion lips, that promised to the man she loved sweet draughts of nectar that would satisfy, but never satiate.

Girlhood had been swallowed up, and she was now a woman knowing her own worth, and, with the knowledge, resolved not to be relegated to past submission by the man who had wounded her heart by his coldness and indifference.

"Come, Dinah!" she exclaimed, gayly; "you will help me to dress. I am ugly in my own eyes no longer, and will use art as the handmaiden of beauty. Come, you have given me, by your words, that delicious draught of knowledge, for I am impatient to appear before him looking my very best!"

No girl about to be launched on the sea of a Washington season could have been more eager to bring out every good point, or have been induced by vanity and a desire for admiration to spend hours over her toilette, deliberating over the cut of a robe, the set of a jewel, or the style of her coiffure.

As a finish, she placed a spray of scarlet azaleas in her braids, murmuring:

"He gawe me some of these when we first met, and I have kept them locked away; yet, though withered, they speak to me of that handsome, fair, boyish face, and of that soft voice that was the first to subdue my wild nature, because it spoke of flowers, which I so dearly love. These, though almost scentless, give forth to me a delicious fragrance, reminding me of my darling mother, who always wore them, and my baby fingers often played with them as they nestled in her hair. Perhaps Pierce will be pleased to see that I wear them to-night, and remember the time when he gave me a spray just like these."

She looked critically at herself for the last time before descending to the parlor and saw there, reflected in the mirror, a tall, elegant girl, robed in silver-gray satin, adorned with knots of black velvet and lace.

Her neck and arms were nearly bare, and the warm-tinted olive skin shone through the black rich veil that only half concealed her bust, where a thousand charms seemed to lurk.

"Shall I please him, mammy?" she asked, confidently, as she adjusted her train with a coquettish air and a proud smile of approaching triumph.

"Who can say?" was the quiet reply. "Men leab the choicest flowers unplucked to gather weeds. But my chile is looking well, and need not fear dat pale lily with the cunning eyes. Beware ob her! She may yet cross your path like a serpent!"

"Why, Dinah," replied Coral, laughingly, "I declare you are jealous of my dear friend, Bell! She a serpent, indeed! How can passion lurk under that angel face?"

"An' yet, in de sunny land ob your birth, chile, you fine de deadliest snake coiled under the faires' trees and flowers, ready to dart their fangs into your flesh. Dinah likes not the doll; she can read her thoughts in her face. Did you not see how she won your husban's smiles, that are yours by right? Ah, chile, you will yet learn to suspect where once you trusted!"

Coral laughed gayly at these forebodings, and tripped lightly out of the room; while Dinah shook her head gravely, and muttered:

"She is born to pain and to make oders suffer too. Dey do not understan' my beautiful chile, dese cold, proud, disdainful strangers, who de sun refuses to shine on like it does on us. She can pay back scorn for scorn, hate for hate, an' love as few women can. Dinah sees it all; an' some day will teach dem a terrible lesson."

Meanwhile Coral had entered the drawing-room, where her husband was chatting, almost gayly, with Bell and Madame Simon.

On seeing her, Bell exclaimed:

"How charming you are looking to-night, *ma cherie!* Do you not think so, Mr. Elthorp?"

He turned and looked at her with an air of languid indifference that caused her veins to tingle, and said:

"I am no judge, Miss Allingham; but I certainly cannot say that those flowers become her; they jar upon my taste!"

Coral stood like a statue, as if suddenly turned to stone at the thought that he could speak thus of her in the presence of others, or call attention to her want of taste in wearing flowers endeared to her by *him* and the memory of the past.

She had come before him to triumph, and he had ruthlessly thrust her down, stabbed her to the heart through her affection, and mocked at her want of taste.

And this was the man she had willingly sacrificed herself to at the bidding of a dying man!

Her very soul rose up indignantly, and like a lightning flash that destroys in an instant, she tore the spray from her hair and trampled it under her foot, hissing out:

"Lie there in the dust like my heart! 'Tis cruel, unmanly, and I wish I were dead!"

"Coral, you know that we are not alone?" Mr. Elthorp asked, with a frown at this, in his opinion, unseemly conduct. "Will you never learn to curb your petulance? I mean no offense, and am sorry if I wounded your feelings."

"Wounded!" she exclaimed, angrily. "What else have you ever done? You are kind to me as you would be to your horses or dogs, forgetting that I am a human being, with susceptibilities to be considered, and a heart hungering for sympathy, not eternal reproaches! You might have spared my feelings by speaking to me in private. The flowers you despised were prized by me because when I came to your home, an orphan and a stranger, you gave me azaleas. Oh, it is cruel to forget, and I wish again that I were dead, sleeping beside my father and mother!"

He looked thoroughly pale with anger, but was too well bred to give vent to it in the presence of others; and he now preserved a pitying silence, such as cut her to the heart, for she wanted a vent for her pent-up feelings, and he would not give her further opportunity.

Bell turned to the window during the short, passionate scene, wondering if Coral really loved this man, and thinking that never would it come to pass that he could love her in return; she so passionate and impulsive, so thoroughly reckless of the opinion of others—he, grave, thoughtful, refined, and fastidious to a fault. As well expect the poles to meet as that these two should fuse into one harmonious whole.

And yet he could admire, as Bell Allingham had experienced; for even now, as she looked her sympathy, he smiled on her, but had only frowns for his girl-wife.

Madame Simon, though a strict disciplinarian, had a soft spot in her heart for this wayward, willful pupil of hers, and going over to Coral, she kissed her, saying:

"Mr. Elthorp, you will pardon my dear Coral. She is a credit to my establishment, and has powers and capacities that will astonish even you in time. I have always found that her faults are of the head rather than of the heart. A more loving, affectionate nature than hers does not exist; but she requires coaxing, and can always be led, but not driven."

Whispering softly, madame added, for Coral's ear alone:

"Say you are sorry, for you really were at fault. It is paying me a poor compliment to be so petulant."

Coral really liked her preceptress, and willingly complied with her request, and turning to her husband, she said quietly, "Pierce, I am sorry I gave way to temper! Am I for-

given?"—accompanying this appeal with a yearning look which ought to have melted his heart.

Now was the time for each to learn how to bear and forbear, how to understand and make allowances for each other's failings, and to be drawn together in a bond of affection, if not of love.

But he allowed the golden moment to pass, and although he said, "Yes, pray say no more!" he really had not forgiven or forgotten; for it annoyed him that she should be such a contrast in speech and deportment to Bell, who was his *beau ideal* of what a lady should be.

Like most young men who marry early, before reason has tempered judgment, and experience toned down preconceived notions imbibed at college or from near associations, he started with the idea that he was a perfect Solon in every matter pertaining to a wife's duty—could choose her dresses, her amusements, and subdue her to his will thoroughly; in fact, his wife was to be docile, quiet, gentle, and never make herself notorious in anything she did, but was to be always cheerful and greet him with smiles, and be—what no woman has ever yet been—mere clay in his hands, to be molded as he wished.

He was to shine like a planet; she as a satellite, borrowing luster from him.

His aunt Clara was another of his models; but he forgot that hers was a nature to lean upon others, especially on those she loved, and that she had sacrificed and effaced herself for the sake of him and his dead father.

"I suppose I must bear it," Coral thought, as she looked at her husband. "I love him, in spite of all. If he could but see into my heart, he would find his image reflected there. I dare not tell him of this; he would only repulse me and say it was bad form. Oh, for something to love that would turn and caress me! Then how happy I should be! And now I am so miserable! How will it all end? It will kill me—this canker-worm of cold indifference—this grave politeness, which gnaws at my very heart, and freezes its impulses! Why did we ever meet, to wed and lead so unhappy a life—ever apart?"

Bell was furtively scrutinizing Coral's face, and saw there a look of vexation, and fearing another outburst, which would spoil their evening's amusement, hastened to say, as she took a delicate white rose from a spray she wore in her bosom:

"Dear Coral, accept this, and let it replace those poor unfortunate azaleas. It will contrast so nicely with your dark hair, and I am sure your husband would like it. May I adjust it, dear?"

Coral glanced furtively at her grand seignor, and seeing his smile of approval, replied,

meaningly, as she watched the effect of her words upon him:

"Those who love me could never gratify me more than by giving me flowers. I love them with a deep reverence; they speak to me when I am alone and sad with a voice that seems to come back to me from the dead. Come, Bell, and deck me, not for a sacrifice, but for pleasure. I mean to be gay, and am so sorry if I have marred this meeting."

She bowed her head, and permitted Bell to pin the white rose in her hair, like a stately palm bending to the lowly bush; and Bell's white fingers gleamed among that sable wave like snow on ebony; and her blue eyes were turned inquiringly toward the man who, since the first moment of their meeting, shared her every thought, and she was gratified to see in his a look of admiration.

Like a Judas, she kissed the brow of this guileless child of Nature, with fresh, dewy lips, while she courted the attention of Pierce, who, whether for evil or for good, felt himself irresistibly drawn toward this siren with the face of an angel, but the heart of a deceitful woman, who had not yet plumbed the depths of its treacherous currents, and was only now awakening to taste the triumph of her first conquest—and that a married man, and the husband of her dearest friend.

To do her justice, she intended no harm; but, for all that, she was playing with hearts which could be broken and severed past reuniting.

The nurse, Dinah, stood in the shadow of the doorway, her black eyes taking in every detail of this by-play, with a pale, sickly look of anger on her yellow skin—lips parted, and white teeth gleaming in the somber shadow of the curtain, like a tigress in ambush, ready to spring at the throat of its victim.

Coral raised her head and started when she saw Dinah's expression; for too well she knew how the descendant of a slave could hate, and make that hate felt—ay, even as cruelly as the claws of a panther that strike deep into quivering flesh, and hold their prey writhing in agony.

She feared for Bell's safety, whom this quadroon hated because of her (Coral's) friendship for her; and again, that she had noticed how Pierce admired her;—great sins these in the eyes of the woman who lived only for the sake of the child she had nursed in infancy, and watched and tended carefully by day and night ever since.

"Give me my cloak, mammy," she said; "you need not wait up for me, as I shall not return till late."

"I could not sleep, my jewel; it would look like a sin to close my eyes w'en my

chile is not wid me. You will be careful, and not risk takin' cold in dis country ob mist, dat chills one's bery heart!"

And bending reverently before Coral, she took her hand and kissed it as if she had been a princess, and one to whom homage was due.

When she had gone, Pierce said:

"It is a mystery to me, Coral, how you can bear such a person near you; it makes me shudder and you to look ridiculous. I shall send her back to Cuba on a liberal pension."

"That you shall not!" she exclaimed defiantly, "for she is the only link that binds me to the past and to my sunny home in the far-off South. And she loves me, and my dear mother, when dying, placed me in her care, and made her swear on the Holy Bible never to leave me in life. Would you not respect such an oath, Pierce, notwithstanding how little consideration you deem me worthy of?"

"We won't discuss the matter any further," he said, irritably; "my wishes appear to have no value in your eyes, Mrs. Elthorp."

She turned haughtily from him and met the smiling face of Bell, who was amused at this phase of matrimonial life, and wondered whether, if she and Coral changed places, matters would be different.

The carriage was announced, and put a stop to all this jarring, much to the relief of Madame Simon, whose conjugal career had been of the most placid character, simply because she and her husband had made a compact at the outset never to interfere with each other's whims and fancies.

Coral was silent as the carriage drove through the broad, well-lit streets of the metropolis, battling with herself, trying hard to be good and to exorcise the demon of anger that had fixed itself in her heart and brain.

Although the streets were crowded with throngs of people hurrying to and fro, and from the houses there came sounds of music and merriment, she felt that she was alone in a vast solitude—a wilderness of *his* making; and now, to crown all, he wished to wrest from her her only friend, whose devoted heart beat for her alone.

All was glare and glitter, and she passed men and women as if in a dream, without recognizing a single human lineament.

To her they were like so many phantoms, flitting past into the dark shadows of an immensity of space.

When the carriage drew up at the grand entrance, she awoke with a start, and touched her husband's hand lightly as he assisted her to alight.

For the moment she was dazzled by the full blaze of innumerable gas-lights, and placed her hand to her eyes to shut out the sight.

Pierce noticed this, and said, softly, and "My dear Coral, I hope you are not ill?"

Oh, how these words, simple and commonplace as they were, thrilled her with delight, as if she had been listening to the voice of an angel!

"No, Pierce," she replied; "I am quite well, thank you."

And she leant affectionately on his arm as they ascended the carpeted stairs, forming part of a social galaxy of beauty and fashion, clothed in purple and fine linen, and faring sumptuously every day, while almost within ken of this palatial building, this amphitheater devoted to the Muses, there dwelt thousands to whom one little tithe of this wealth would have been an unspeakable boon.

But so the world wags—rich and poor separated by a broad gulf that charity cannot span, or ever really tries to.

They took their places in a box on the first tier, just as the overture crashed out in brazen notes, and crashing cymbals, and roll of drum, amid a buzz of conversation that sounded like echoes amid the din.

Opera-glasses were leveled at their box, and inquiries went round as to who the occupants were—that dark girl the type of southern beauty, whose flashing eyes outvied the diamond's gleam, and whose parted lips disclosed pearls guarded by gates of coral, and who listened with the earnestness of a soul enraptured to the grand strains of the orchestra, showing that she was a neophyte admitted for the first time to these realms of music.

And others dwelt with admiration, quickened by that sylph-like form and sweet face, on Bell, who, unlike Coral, showed a well-bred indifference to everything but the increasing motion of the fashionable throng, and chatted prettily to their escort as she used her fan with all the grace acquired from a French preceptress.

At last the curtain rose on the grand opera of "La Prophete," a gem, and one of Meyerbeer's *chef d'œuvres*.

Coral had eyes and ears for nothing else as she followed the details of every scene which to her were realistic, and seemed to be enacted in the period of which they treated, not by singers, but by the real personages of the story itself.

She gave a sigh when the curtain dropped on the first act, and felt irritable at being compelled to reply to commonplace questions when she had just listened to such divine strains and utterances.

There was in her a profound love of the beautiful, both in art and nature, which never failed to speak to her very soul, and no one could look upon her face, illumined as it was with an ecstacy of delight, without feeling that hers was a mind of no ordinary caliber that could thus be swept by genius, vibrating to every delicate touch of the great *maestro*, who, dead, yet spoke through his music.

Almost for the first time Coral swept the theater with her glasses, and was surprised at the sea of faces which met her gaze at every turn; faces wearing masks; men and women in society costume, and smiles, whose hearts were troubled with ambition, intrigue, and other things which it is customary to term "skeletons in the cupboard;" gaunt, dead things, carefully put away out of sight for times of solitude.

In the opposite box were two gentlemen, both young, and bearing about them the unmistakable hall-mark of birth and breeding, and who were surveying the occupants of Mr. Elthorp's box with evident interest.

These were one of the young Astors, and a man of greater mark, a Mr. Philip Denton, who swayed the tide of speculation in Wall street, and was reputed to be a veritable modern Cræsus.

He had burst upon the world like a meteor, and had become a planet, a fixed star, around which society revolved, all being eager, like sportsmen on a race-course, to back this favorite jockey, who rode the famous steed "Riches."

"Who are those girls?" he asked; "that dark one more especially, who quite throws her companion into the shade with her splendid eyes, that seem to flash through you, and her mobile face on which every motion of the heart is faithfully indicated? By Jove! she is the making of a superb woman, who will sway society yet, if she cares to do so."

"Why, Denton, you are fairly smitten with this newly-discovered star. I can hazard a shrewd guess that she is Mrs. Elthorp, the wife of the man at her side; who, by the way, is an old college chum of mine. Have you not heard of the romance of their marriage? 'Pon word, it is the funniest thing you ever heard! But perhaps I bore you?"

"Not at all, old fellow. I should like to hear more, for I must confess the lady interests me greatly."

"Fancy her being still at school!"

"Nonsense!—incredible! You must be jesting, Astor!"

"Fact; packed her off there and then, after father's funeral. Never lived with her since."

"The man must be a lunatic," was the laughing reply, "if he doesn't value such a woman; who, if I mistake not, is a prize worth winning and retaining. Some other fellow will snatch her from his foolish grasp, and serve him right!"

And he added mentally:

"That other fellow will be me; at least, I shall try!"

This as he caressed his dark mustache, displaying a diamond ring of immense value, and bent his piercing eyes upon his future contemplated conquest; who, all unconsciously, was talking to her husband, little dreaming that this visit to the opera would mark a new epoch in her young life, or that she had aroused a passion in one who had wealth at his back, and who never yet failed in anything he essayed to accomplish; a resolute, determined man, with a will like iron, but skillfully concealed under a pleasing, quiet exterior—who wore a silken glove o'er an iron hand.

"I will introduce you, if you like, Denton. Pierce Elthorp is rather reserved, but not a bad sort. Great student at college; expects diplomatic work shortly."

"You would be conferring a favor, Astor. It is something refreshing to meet ladies who have not yet been out."

After the next act, which, if anything, was more absorbing to Coral than its predecessor, the young millionaire and his friend lounged round to Pierce's box, and were welcomed by him, and the introductions being completed, the conversation became general.

Denton, like the man of the world he was, found little difficulty in monopolizing Coral without attracting observation; and she really enjoyed his society, his incisive wit and brilliant conversation, which awoke in her new desires to be launched into society, where such men were to be found.

In the next act the tenor created quite a *furor*, and Coral's eyes danced with delight as the impassioned singer poured forth a flood of melody that held the vast and critical audience spellbound.

While thunders of applause greeted him, Coral, impulsively and ignorantly, knowing nothing yet of the rules of etiquette in such matters, threw her bouquet to him, and was delighted when, raising it to his lips, he bowed and smiled his thanks, amid quite a titter from several ladies, and a look of amused astonishment from the men.

The hot blood of anger surged into Pierce Elthorp's face at this fresh display of his wife's craving, as he thought, for notoriety of the most humiliating kind.

But Denton with great tact averted the storm, and the very fact of his paying such marked attention to the offender against good

taste quite condoned the offense in the eyes of those who had witnessed the *contretemps*.

When Pierce and the ladies had left, Denton went round to the stage-door, and saw Signor Marochella, the great tenor, and said:

"A lady, carried away by your splendid talents, threw you her bouquet; her husband is anxious for its return, and has deputed me to offer you any sum you wish to name for its restoration."

"Monsieur, you ask too much; I would not part with the flowers for any consideration. If the lady wishes for them I shall not refuse, but she must see me in person, and not by deputy."

"But Mr. Pierce Elthorp may prove troublesome in the matter, my friend."

"What care I for jealous husbands or cavaliers, monsieur? The flowers were a gift, and shall not be given up! Do you suppose that a singer cannot be a gentleman, or that he would part with his laurels for mere dross? I want no money, and pardon me for saying that I consider you have affronted me by your proposal—unintentionally it may be; and I should advise you not to speak further on such a matter. Adieu, monsieur; the flowers are mine, and I will treasure them in the hope of some day meeting the donor and thanking her in person."

And with a haughty bow, Marochella, in whose veins there flowed noble blood, turned on his heel, and left the millionaire astounded, defeated, and uttering sundry maledictions on the head of the great tenor.

CHAPTER V.

THE FACE IN THE MIRROR.

IN Boston and in other great cities, there were speculators, money-kings that awaited with impatience the arrival of Denton, that great Pactolus, who, however, chose to remain in New York.

His whims were more important to him than the ups and downs of the money market; and having resolved to win Coral, he remained at his post, and contrived to throw himself in her way upon several occasions; but, like a skillful general, masked his intentions, and paid more open attention to Miss Allingham than to her, as a blind.

"You have made a conquest, Bell," Coral remarked, one afternoon, as they sat sipping chocolate, and chatting confidentially over matters which interested them. "I congratulate you; Mr. Denton is very wealthy, and much sought after, I hear."

"Do you like him, Coral?" Bell asked, with affected simplicity, but covertly watch-

ing that face which was as open to her reading as the page of a book.

"Well, yes; but our acquaintance has been too short to form a decided opinion upon his merits or demerits. He seems very agreeable; but I feel sure he is smitten with you, Bell."

"Why, Coral?"

"Because he is so attentive to you when we meet; but you know it, you little hypocrite, as well as you do how pretty and fascinating you are. He cannot mean his attentions for me. I'm married, and he knows it. Of course, he would not dare to think of me; it would be very wrong if he did."

Guileless girl, to suppose that the sacred tie of marriage would deter men from approaching you insidiously, or preserve you from their wiles! Neglected by your husband, you, in the eyes of unscrupulous men, whose passions and desires are the acme of life, are just a subject for them to practice their arts upon, to sap and mine the citadel of your virtue, until it totters and falls, crushing you under its ruins, while they pass by and lay fresh siege to another heart.

"Oh, of course, you are safe, dear Coral," remarked Bell, "and can enjoy a stolen pleasure without risk of losing your heart!"

Then after a pause, she continued:

"Do you know, Coral, I think it wise that girls should endure temptations before they enter the portals of society."

"Indeed! Why?"

"Because it teaches them how to avoid future shoals and quicksands. Innocence, is in my opinion, a great drawback to a woman just entering upon life: she sees everything *couleur de rose*, and is not suspicious of lurking intentions!"

"You are quite a philosopher, Bell," Coral answered with a merry laugh; "and I am sure your tenets would alarm my matter-of-fact husband!"

"Oh, he's a paragon, and never reads French novels. But I wish to confide in you, Coral!"

"I shall be delighted, especially if you have received a proposal!"

"I have!" This with a mischievous twinkle in her blue eyes, and a roguish smile that lurked in every dimple, like the sunbeams that kiss the eddies and shallows of the streamlet.

"Oh, you darling!" exclaimed Coral, as she kissed the little fairy; "I am so glad! When did he speak to you?"

"Oh, he wrote."

"How strange! But it's all the same, of course. And have you said yes, Bell?"

"I am waiting for your permission, Coral."

"For mine? How can it affect me? You know your own heart best."

Bell fairly screamed with laughter at Coral's mystification; and said at last, as she placed a letter in her hand, "Read and inwardly digest the proposal for yourself. It is from Mr. Denton, as you can see by the monogram."

Coral glanced at the contents; and said with a quick upward glance of perplexed astonishment, "Why, Bell, it is an invitation to a mask ball! You surely do not mean to accept it?"

"Don't I, though? And both of us! Won't it be fine fun, Coral?"

"But what will madame say?"

"As if we would be such simpletons as to take her into our confidence! The elite of the city will be there, and our disguises will prevent our being recognized. Think of the splendor of the scene—the music, the lights, the flowers, the dancers whirling madly past one, and the brilliant repartees, and the thousand and one attractions of such a scene, and then tell me if you can refuse a few hours of such bliss!"

"I admit you have whetted my curiosity, Bell. Now, if Pierce could take us, I should be delighted!"

"If you wait for that, you will never go. I can manage the whole affair splendidly, dresses and all."

"But how are we to evade madame's vigilance?"

"Easily enough. Gold will keep the stern janitor, otherwise Charles, the footman, silent. A five-dollar bill will deter the old dog from barking. Do you consent? If not, I will not go by myself, and would forever regret the disappointment."

This specious pleading proved successful, and Coral replied, "I will not desert you, Bell, although I feel that the step is not one I ought to take."

"You are indeed a darling, Coral!" Bell cried, fairly hugging her with delight. "I must lose no time, for we have only three days in which to prepare, and there is a lot to be done in the time. I will go as *Aurora*, and you as *Cleopatra*. Are you satisfied with my selection?"

"Yes; it's perfect, and does you great credit, Bell; but how are we to obtain these costumes?"

"That will be my care. Ask no questions, and merely guess at the truth. If you miss it, it won't much matter. The dresses will be forthcoming, depend upon it."

The eventful night arrived, and found the lovely conspirators closeted together in Bell's chamber, the door of which had been prudently locked, putting the finishing touches to their toilets, which were simply magnifi-

cent, and had been provided by Mr. Denton, regardless of expense.

Bell, as *Aurora*, wore a dead-white satin robe, with a sweeping train, over which there fell, with aerial lightness, a gossamer dress of parti-colors—blue, pink, and opal tints, caught up with silver sprays and diamond spangles.

On her fair young brow there rested a coronet of silver, inlaid with precious stones—diamonds, rubies, emeralds, and sapphires; and her sylph-like waist was clasped with a silver zone, richly chased and jeweled.

Coral was enraptured with her friend's appearance, but she herself far eclipsed her in her character-costume of *Cleopatra*, which consisted of purple velvet, embroidered in gold, stomacher studded with brilliants, and a golden girdle set with jewels, worth a king's ransom; while over her tresses, black as midnight gloom, was thrown a golden tissue fabric, reaching to the hem of her robe.

Silently the girls cloaked each other, and then stole noiselessly to the back door, where the footman awaited them.

Once out in the street, they found a carriage and pair awaiting, and were immediately driven off to the revels, accompanied by Denton, who was attired as a Spanish grandee, and it must be confessed looked remarkably well.

Coral did not feel quite at her ease, and her conscience reminded her that she was not doing her duty to her husband, who, with all her faults, trusted her implicitly: nor did she feel happy under Denton's admiring glances.

"I must make an impression on her to-night," he thought—(meaning Coral).

But openly he flirted with Bell, who, however, was not so dense as he gave her credit for, and with a woman's quick perception saw that her friend was his lode-star.

Before reaching the academy the ladies put on their dominoes, lest among the gay throng some one should recognize them, and Madame Simon should hear of their escapade through such a source.

On entering the parquet which was floored over for a ball-room, the girls were struck by its magnificence, and dazzled by the ever-moving throng of costumed men and women.

"Is it not beautiful?" Bell asked. "You are not sorry now you came, are you, Coral?"

"No, *ma* Bell. But let us converse in French only. My chief anxiety is that we should not be recognized by any chance acquaintance."

At this moment Bell pulled her sleeve, and said, "Coral, look yonder! Do you see that gentleman who has just entered at the left with that large party? Is he not like—"

"Who?" was the eager question.

"It was a mere fancy," replied Bell; "and I will not trouble you with my thoughts."

But to herself she murmured, "It is surely Pierce Elthorp or I am much mistaken. If I alarm Coral, she might leave. We must trust to our disguises for safety. But I will mention my fears to Mr. Denton, who may be able to discover whether my suspicions are correct."

The vast room was brilliantly lighted by chandeliers which held thousands of electric lights, and was crowded with gay maskers, attired in every variety of color and costume, forming a sight not easily forgotten.

The strains from the hidden orchestra came floating through banks of violets and ferns, while here and there crystal fountains threw up jets of sweet perfume that mingled with and softened the atmosphere, making the place a veritable Elysium of bliss, where veiled beauties floated by to the divine sounds of melody, and everything bore marks of refined wealth and luxuriant taste.

A few moments later, while talking to Denton, Bell was accosted by a gentleman wearing the costume of *Charles the Second*, who said in a low tone, "Surely, fair morning star, you have shone on me before?"

With a slight start, she perceived that it was the gentleman she had seen and imagined she knew; but her presence of mind did not forsake her, now that she recognized by his voice, low-toned though it was, that he was Pierce Elthorp himself; but how he came to be there so inopportunist was a mystery which remained to be solved.

"Perhaps," she replied, disguising her voice as much as possible, "you may have lived in other worlds than that over which I shine."

And taking Denton's arm, she hurried away from the dangerous spot, trembling with alarm, but resolved not to be driven away from the revels by the discovery she had made unless absolutely compelled.

"I could have sworn it was Miss Allingham!" Pierce murmured; "but surely she would not be here without madame's permission, and that she could hardly obtain, indulgent as she is!"

Fate seemed resolved to pursue Coral relentlessly in thus bringing her husband on her track unwittingly at a time when she was justified in believing he was safe at Elthorp.

He had received his appointment at the Court of St. Petersburg, and was shortly to sail, but had come on to the city with the intention of spending a day or two with Coral first.

Having called that day on a friend, he was prevailed upon to attend the ball, to be in-

troduced to some foreign diplomats, and therefore postponed his visit to Madame Simon's establishment till the morrow.

He had not written to Coral to tell her of his appointment, because she had already expressed her disapproval of his acceptance of any such post, and he did not care to be annoyed by her remonstrances.

Meanwhile, Bell was in anxious debate with Denton on the subject of Pierce's presence.

"Had Mrs. Elthorp and I not better leave, Mr. Denton?" she asked, in a tone of trepidation. "If he discovers her, there is every prospect of an unpleasant scene as the result."

"I would advise you not to go. You have disarmed his suspicions, and need only place Mrs. Elthorp on her guard to secure your *incognito*. It is unfortunate he should be here; but I see no danger, as you are both well masked."

Coral found her friends after a long search, and showed more courage than Bell had when she knew that her husband was among the throng.

Her decision was promptly made, and she said, "Bell, you and I must separate at once. Mr. Denton will take care of you, and I have no fear but that I shall meet cavaliers who will be attentive to me. If Pierce should happen to see us together, he would discover all."

Denton was too well bred to show his annoyance at this vexatious incident, but inwardly raged at the disappointment of not having Coral for a companion.

"Let us hope that Mr. Elthorp will not make a long stay," he said, grimly. "I shall be near you, Mrs. Elthorp, in case you should need my poor services."

There was a feeling of exultation at Coral's heart at being able thus to outwit her cold, imperious husband, who, if he had had his will, would have placed her in some convent to be reduced to submission.

More than once she passed him, but as he did not think she could ever look so elegant or graceful, he had no suspicion of her identity, although, like many other gentlemen, he admired her stately and regal style very much.

At last she made her way out of the ball-room to an ante-room, fitted up as a bower, with climbing plants, rare exotics, and statues in niches holding colored lamps which shed a soft, subdued light around.

It was unoccupied, save by a gentleman in the dress of a minstrel, who, on seeing her, said, gallantly:

"Oh, dusky Queen, I long to tell you of love's passion in song! May I not string my lute in your honor?"

His mask had fallen half-off, and she recognized in him the great tenor, Marochella, about whom all New York was raving.

"That would, indeed, be a pleasure," she said, softly; "for who has not heard of your fame?"

She threw herself negligently on a rustic seat embowered in roses, and listened to his soft serenade, which was like the low tones of a silver flute. She now unmasked, and the great singer recognized her as the lady who had thrown him the bouquet.

Kneeling, he was in the act of raising her hand to his lips, when, to her dismay, she saw, in a side mirror, the face of her husband, who had also discarded his mask.

Coral's face became suffused with confusion as she said, hurriedly:

"Stand before me! I am here by stealth! Oh, save me!"

Quick as thought, he hid her from view by placing himself before her, but too late to disarm Pierce's suspicions, which were now thoroughly aroused.

"I am sure I am right!" he muttered, as he left the room. To-morrow I will question Dinah; and Coral must be removed from Madame Simon's neglectful care, and accompany me to St. Petersburg, or go to Elthorp."

CHAPTER VI.

A LOYAL HEART.

NEXT morning Coral was awakened by great splashes of rain beating against the window, which made her shiver as she went through the duties of her toilette.

"What a stormy morning!" she murmured. "Perhaps it presages trouble for me with Pierce. I sincerely trust that my foolish escapade will not get Bell into trouble. I care not so much for myself. I can fight my own battle somehow."

About noon Pierce arrived, and immediately requested to see the nurse.

When Dinah entered, with a snaky glitter in her dusky eyes, suspecting his motive for this interview, he said, in a tone of calm authority:

"Dinah, I command you to tell me the truth about Mrs. Elthorp! I will pay you handsomely for the information. Where was your mistress last night?"

She gave him a quick glance of hatred, and said:

"You want to buy my words; is it not so, master?"

"Yes; you are in the secrets of your mistress, and must know whether she left the seminary last night. Now tell me the truth without fear; I will hold you blameless!"

"An' you ask me to betray her for gold! She, who I have nursed from her babyhood,

an' cradled in my arms! Would the tigress betray her young, or the snake devour its own? Why do you insult me, master? Go, before I lose my patience, an' tell you what you are!"

Mr. Elthorp was so taken aback by the woman's attack, that he could scarcely believe that he heard aright, or that she could have refused his bribe.

He had seen Coral, when a child cruelly ill—use this colored woman—treat her with every insult; and yet she could refuse to speak against her.

But he had not seen the tender buds of love that germed in that young heart, and which, when the child grew older, bloomed and bore fruit, until Coral by every means in her power taught the quadroon the fact of her love.

As he made no reply, Dinah continued:

"You shall not buy my words, master! I love de chile, and will keep my oath to her dead mother! Would you have me break it?"

She had touched a chord in his breast that vibrated to her every word, and he replied:

"I beg your pardon for attempting to bribe you; but remember, she, while away from me, is in your care; and you owe me your duty as well as she."

"Heaven help her, poor darlin'—mudderless, fadderless, an' dwelling among strangers! She is imprisoned here when she longs to be in the green fields among singin' birds. Oh, master, be kind to her! She is good, and could luv you if you would only try to win dat luv; but if you treat her coldly, her heart will break!" And Dinah cast herself at his feet, and continued, in a tone of passionate entreaty: "She is passionate, for she was born in a country where de sun burns and scorches, an' she cannot help her nature. You will take Dinah's advice will you not, master?"

Raising her gently, he said:

"Your love for my wife blinds you to her faults. I would not willingly pain her; but I alone must form her character and teach her what it is to fill the position of a wife with grace and dignity. I may not have made my meaning very clear to you, Dinah; but I can assure you Coral has no truer friend in the world than I, except it be yourself. You may leave me now; but please do not say a word of all this to her."

As she walked away from him, she muttered:

"I asked him for bread an' he gibs me a stone! Will he never understand my chile's heart?"

Pierce paced the reception-room in anxious thought, with lines of care on his otherwise smooth fair brow; for he had come to put Coral's obedience to the test.

He sent up his card, requesting to see Mrs. Elthorp alone, and she received the message with much foreboding, fearing, as she exchanged meaning glances with Bell, that he had come to accuse her of an act of grave impropriety.

She entered the room with a stolid, defiant look on her face, the same he so well remembered when she had first come to Elthorp as a child.

Kissing her forehead, (how she hated those formal kisses, so cold, and passionless, and unmeaning), he led her to a seat, and taking his place at her side, said, kindly, but with covert meaning:

"You are not looking so well this morning, Coral. You have been studying too hard, child, perhaps."

"The storm is coming," she thought. "Let it!"

But to her great relief he did not touch upon the dreaded subject, and entered at once upon the matter he had at heart.

"I have received an appointment at the Russian Court, and am now about to start for St. Petersburg."

"Indeed, Pierce, I am glad of that, for your sake. You will write to me often, I hope?"

Her face had relaxed, and the stony mask had given place to a look of yearning tenderness as she thought that months, perhaps years, might elapse before she would see him again.

Somehow, in all her dreams for the future—those airy castles, which men and women are wont to build—she never imagined a life spent with him; and, although disappointed, was not surprised when she heard that he was going away to a far-off country of snow and ice, the mere thought of whose dreariness and desolateness made her shudder.

"I shall have no occasion to write to you, Coral," he said.

And then stopped short, and looked to see if she had caught his meaning.

"Why, Pierce?" As she cast her eyes down to the floor, and two burning spots suffused her cheeks, mortification and anger concentrating there.

He smiled, as he replied:

"Because you will accompany me."

"I? Oh, no, Pierce, it would kill me! Ever since you spoke of it first, I have dreamt of that bitter land with fear and horror. I love the sun, and birds, and flowers, and teeming life; do not take me to that land of the dead!"

"Coral, this is simply ridiculous! It is a pleasant country; you will enjoy the charms of refined society, and when the winter departs the sun shines with warmth, and all nature starts into life. It is a mere prejudice,

and one that you will soon learn to smile at. Besides, have you no wish to be with me?"

"Oh, yes," she replied, eagerly, with deep blushes; "but not there—anywhere but there, Pierce! Let our wedded life begin at dear old Elthorp, where I first met you; and who knows but that our love for each other may bridge over my dislike to that country whither you wish to take me? Why are you going? You are rich, and I, too. Surely, there are duties which men can perform as well in America as elsewhere. Give up this appointment, Pierce, for my sake!"

And then, as if alarmed at her own temerity, she sat and looked at his face, with eyes filled with wild alarm, and a heart palpitating so that she could count each of its pulsations.

"Coral, you cannot be in earnest! Would you condemn me to idleness, and thwart my ambition to be something more than an idle gentleman? Pshaw! you are only a child, and do not understand these matters. You must give way to my wishes. I shall delay my journey for some days; your outfit can soon be procured; as for your furs, they had better be purchased in Russia. I am now going to arrange matters with Madame Simon."

Her bosom heaved, and her whole frame quivered with conflicting emotions.

Impulsively she cast herself on his breast, and wound her arms around his neck, saying with great sobs:

"Oh, if you knew how I loved you, and how I long to be with you always, you would stay at home, and give up anything for the sake of the love I bear you!"

"Do not be foolish," he said, as he gently disengaged her clinging arms. "It is not a question of love, but willing obedience. I ask nothing but what I have a right to expect, and what any sensible woman would agree to."

She sat in the chair, now huddled up, and with great tears falling from her long, black lashes, a picture of misery.

"Do you not love me?" she sobbed.

"Yes, providing you obey me."

But there was a cold ring in his voice that told her the admission was merely conventional; and on the other hand, he was convinced that her confession of love for him, the first he had ever heard from her lips, had been merely made to gain her own ends.

To him it appeared that they occupied the position of fencers, each waiting to find a way to get within the adversary's guard, and he resolved not to be cajoled into giving her the advantage.

"I will do anything but go to Russia," she said, mastering her emotion, and allowing that stony mask to steal over her face again. "Let me stay here; I have companions, and am accustomed to school-life."

This with bitter resentfulness in her tone, which did not escape him.

Taking her hand with kindly pressure, he said:

"Do not misjudge me, Coral. We married in obedience to your parents' wishes, without one word of love passing between us. You were a mere child, and could not be expected to fill the position of wife with credit to yourself or me without first being educated; had I neglected that point, and thrust you into society, you would have blamed me in years to come, when you saw yourself outshone in everything that adds additional charm to women's society. I know my conduct is open to criticism; but, believe me, I was only actuated by a sense of duty to both you and myself. Cannot you see this, Coral?"

But she did not reply, and mistaking her silence for a tacit admission, he continued:

"It has been the dream of my life ever since I went to the University to fit myself for the position I have just succeeded in obtaining against a host of competitors, and yet you ask me to resign it for your sake, because of an absurd prejudice. If I complied I should be held up to ridicule and contempt as a soldier would who refused to proceed to his post after enlisting in the army. I cannot relinquish my appointment, Coral, much as I wish to oblige you. I promised my father to be not only a husband but a protector to you, and I have every desire to be even more than I said I would. Come, now, shew me that you will be a true wife, and help me to win a name and position, and I can assure you you will never regret it."

These arguments did not move her, for they were based on mere ambition, which she did not enter into; had he pleaded for love's sake, she might have given way.

"Pierce Elthorp," she said, "I will not go with you to Russia; no argument shall make me consent. I am sorry to say this, and if you think more of ambition than of me, decide between us."

"My determination, Coral, is fixed; you know my will, which you cannot expect to bend to yours. Within the week you will return to Elthorp; masters will be provided for you, and within certain limits you will have perfect liberty of action. I must now leave you, for I have much to attend to. Good-by, Coral, and I only hope you may never regret your opposition to your husband's wishes."

Kissing her cold, passionless face that was lit up only by two glittering eyes, tearless now, and burning with the fire of defiance, because he had thrown back her love upon

herself, he left her, and she realized that she was alone.

Like a lightning-flash there came over her mind a complete revulsion of feeling—a desire to be reconciled to him; and with outstretched arms, she cried:

"Pierce, come back to Coral!"

But a heavy slamming of the door mocked her, and she fell senseless to the floor.

CHAPTER VII.

RECKLESS TO A FAULT.

CORAL was back at Elthorp, where she delighted to roam about in perfect freedom, enjoying the woods and fields, and the songs of birds; happy as the day was long, and applying herself to study, being ambitious of making herself a clever, accomplished woman—one that even her husband might admire.

She had no idea of rebelling against her aunt's authority; but she, self-willed and hating restraint, caused that good, kind soul many an anxious hour.

"Dear Coral," she was wont to say, with the light of love kindling in her gentle eyes as she looked at her growing beauties, "you are getting a woman now, and must subdue your roving propensities. Besides, it is not seemly or discreet to be seen talking and walking with a gentleman in the absence of Pierce. The world is very censorious, and not for anything would I wish the breath of scandal to approach you, whom I know to be but thoughtless and headstrong."

Coral, however, knew how to silence her aunt's objections, and always succeeded in gaining her own way during the years of her minority, when only at stated periods did she receive letters from her husband, which were invariably cold in tone and teeming with good advice.

At such times she was seized with paroxysms of rage, and even Dinah had a difficulty in pacifying and soothing her wounded pride.

"Why does he torment me?" she used to exclaim. "Am I always to be nothing but a school-girl in his eyes? Let him beware, or I may yet have to teach him that I am a woman, and the lesson may not please him! Husband, indeed! how I wish my poor uncle could see how I am treated! I will write to Pierce some day, and ask him to free me from this hateful bondage! There are men who would sacrifice much for my sake; and yet he is content to stay abroad and slave at a desk, leaving me to mope without society. Oh, how I wish I could banish his image from my heart, for then my course would be clear!"

On one of these occasions, when she was opening her heart to faithful Dinah, showing her all its bitterness, she happened to refer to Bell Allingham, who had gone out to Russia to join her father, the Hon. Mr. Allingham.

"What! did I not tell you?" said the nurse. "She is your enemy, and is winning from him the love that should be yours. If I were in your place I should teach her a lesson. I'd kill her!"

"Mammy you must not say that," said her

mistress, as she saw how much this woman hated Bell; "I can revenge myself. Remember that you are in the North, where revenge would be likely to cost you dear."

"What would I care? I have but one life, and it is yours. Can I bear to see you unhappy?—you who are the pulse of my life, and the very breath of my nostrils? You do not sing gayly now, and the light is going out of your beautiful eyes. You may try to hide it from me, but Dinah knows your heart too well to be deceived. Why does Mr. Denton come here? Because he lubs you, and sees how unhappy you are."

"Dinah, how dare you speak to me of him? I am a wife, and he is too honorable even to wish to make me forget my duty."

"Poor child! if Dinah saw a snake in your path, would she not warn you to avoid it? I hate him, because he will bring trouble on your innocent head!"

"Cease your chatter!" she said, angrily, "and do not meddle with what does not concern you. I should like to know who on this earth you do not hate?"

"You may flash your eyes wid anger, and speak harshly to poor Dinah, but she remembers your sweet mother, an' the promise she gave to guard you from all danger as long as she lived; and that will I do if you kill me."

And the poor woman fairly sobbed and hid her face in her hands, through the fingers of which tears trickled fast.

"Mammy, I am cruel and ungrateful!" cried Coral, as she cast her arms around her nurse's neck and kissed her passionately. "Oh, bear with your child, dear Dinah, and forgive her, for, indeed, I am sorely tried—my heart yearns for love; but I get it not from the only man I would care to receive it from. Do not speak of the other's love to me. I must never see him again, and that would render my life dark and dreary, for I value him as a friend."

"The sun shines again on Dinah, now that her darlin's smile hab returned. You shall please yourself an' not be troubled wid my advice; but, remember, you are beautiful, an' win hearts, and perhaps you may learn to lub some one who might lead you into danger."

Dinah was right, for Coral was drifting further apart from her husband, and Denton had contrived to gain an ascendancy over her, which might in a moment of mad impulse, such as seized her at times, tempt her to forget her position and the man whose name she bore; for, after all, she was only human, and yearned for sympathy and love, which hitherto had been denied her.

Months flew by, and the girl, who once was all angles, developed into a most lovely creature, full of health and vivacity; and when not attacked with a fit of sulks, one of the merriest of women, with a heart brimming over with loving kindness.

Marochella, during the opera season, used to run down to Elthorp to see her, and she was very partial to his society, his singing especially, being a devoted lover of music, and herself no mean performer.

Marochella loved her dearly, and had made her his ideal of beauty—worshiping her in

secret; dreaming of her; living only for the time when he could enjoy her charming society. But of love he spake never a word, although his soul hungered for a single caress; and when their hands met in exchange of greeting, her very touch thrilled him with ecstasy.

He was the darling of society—feted, petted by the rich; but his thoughts always wandered to Elthorp, where his divinity dwelt.

Even her aunt—Miss Elthorp—who was not given to form attachments for the sterner sex, liked the gentle Italian, whose manners were courtly, and about whom there was an unmistakable air of refinement; and she encouraged his visits, while she did all in her power to repel Denton, whom, with a woman's quick instinct, she mistrusted.

At the close of the opera season, Coral suggested to Marochella that he should give a *matinee* in aid of a local charity at Elthorp, and that she, on her part, would enlist the sympathies of country families.

Delighted beyond measure, and having no pressing engagement, he consented, and forthwith set about getting his staff of *artistes* together, of which Coral was to form one—in the capacity of an amateur, of course.

Denton came at her invitation, and superintended the arrangements, which were on an elaborate scale, the mansion being given up into the hands of carpenters and decorators, much to the alarm of gentle Miss Elthorp, who had never known such goings on in her lifetime.

"Dear Coral, is it your wish to take this step without first having consulted your husband?" she said, timidly; for though Coral paid her deference in some things, in others, such as this for instance, she would have her own way as mistress of Elthorp.

"My husband!" she said, scornfully. "I am glad you have given him a name, dear aunty. I have ceased to look upon him in any other light than that of my guardian, and I do not mean to consult his tastes in this or any other matter, for he would be sure to object to anything that conduced to my pleasure. Besides, you dear old Puritan, it is for a good object, and *matinees* are very fashionable. You must help me send out cards of invitation; it is time that Elthorp was *en fete*. Why, there was not even a marriage breakfast in my honor, so I am going to give something on a grand scale to celebrate that not very auspicious event!"

There was a cold, biting thread of irony running through her words, Mr. Elthorp's eccentric conduct in keeping away from her as he did, combined with her own reckless disregard for the opinion of that uncomfortable old party, "Mrs. Grundy," kept the *elite* of the country aloof from Elthorp.

"My dear Coral," replied her aunt, "you have just cause for resentment, I admit; but is it wise to show it in this way? Remember, we live in an age when no one is free from criticism."

"I am not going to trouble myself about that, aunty. I shall send out my cards, and abide by the consequences!"

To Coral's great mortification, polite refusals poured in upon her, until she was fairly ready to cry with vexation.

"This is all his doing," she exclaimed, passionately. "He has by his neglect given rise to scandal of some kind, while he, like a coward, keeps out of the way, leaving me to bear the brunt of it all! But I'll invite somebody; I won't be disappointed, and made a laughing-stock of. Mr. Denton will help me, I know."

"Dear Mrs. Elthorp," he said, when she mentioned the matter to him, "the greatest pleasure of my life is to be of service to you; pardon me for saying so, but it grieves me to see you placed in a false position, through no fault of yours. Why do you, so young and beautiful, with life just opening its gates, submit to this cruel treatment? And oh! Coral, forgive me; but I would relinquish even the hopes of Heaven itself to gain you for my wife!"

"Please do not talk such nonsense!" she said, with affected gayety. "I suppose you think to amuse me; and if I were free there is no reason why I should choose you for a husband. Run away like a good boy, and send off the invitations. Bring in the halt, and the lame, and the blind; do anything you like, but my house must be filled; and don't ever offend again in speaking treason against my husband, or I may get angry!" This as her scorn flashed upon him for his audacity.

Somewhat abashed, he left her, wondering why it was that she should have obtained such a mastery over him, forgetting that she had a will of iron and was as pure in thought as a snowflake.

"He is driving her into my arms, conceited prig that he is. This affair will bring about their separation, or I am much mistaken. I love her too well to wish her to be anything but a wife to me. She is wasting her sweet young life waiting for him to come to his senses. Good heavens! how wickedly foolish some men are! He despises what I would give worlds to possess!"

So ran his musings.

Coral was rehearsing her part as *Rosalind*, in "As You Like It," when she received a telegram announcing the coming of Bell Allingham, who had just returned to her home from Russia.

Coral hardly knew whether to be pleased or not at this intelligence, for the former friendship which had existed between them as school-companions had been weakened by absence.

She showed the telegram to her aunt, saying:

"In the absence of my natural adviser, I want you to tell me what I am to do; shall we invite Bell down? You used to be very partial to her when you came to visit us in New York, aunt."

"But you have no one to meet her, Coral; not a single person of note has accepted your invitation. She might think it odd, dear," she replied, sadly; for she felt the cut direct more keenly than even her niece.

"Never mind that. I'll invite her down. She used to be very amusing; besides, I sadly want a companion to back me up, and to share my responsibilities in entertaining our guests. You love quiet, and shall not be put out on this occasion—there! that's settled; besides, she will have quite a budget of news from Russia, and,

of course, I am dying to hear about that loving husband of mine."

Before her aunt could say anything in reply, Coral ran away, singing a snatch from one of the operas, apparently quite unconcerned about the opinion of Bell or of her husband, and seemingly resolved to bring down the vials of his wrath upon her devoted head.

The following day Bell reached Elthorp, and was warmly welcomed by its young mistress, who was really pleased to see her.

"You are just in time, Bell, to take part in our private theatricals, if you think fit; one of the ladies has dropped out. You will be pleased to hear that your old friend, Mr. Denton, is master of the ceremonies, and Signor Marchella responsible stage manager."

"Why, Coral, whatever are you thinking about? Mr. Elthorp is sure to hear of it, and you know how angry it makes him, my dear."

"He shall hear of it from me, Bella. Several reporters will be present, and I'll send him copies of the papers. As for his anger, I have long ceased to care for that. But come along to your room. I suppose you will stay for the fete?"

"That will all depend upon my father, Coral," she said, somewhat stiffly. "I came down hoping to enjoy a long chat with you, and to bring you some presents which your husband has sent. I fear I shall not be able to make a long stay, as I owe some visits to my friends."

"How changed you are, Bell, since we were at the seminary together! You used to advise me to play off all kinds of tricks on my husband, and now you seem to take his part. Never mind; I hope to survive it all."

Bell was secretly delighted to find that Coral was acting in this reckless manner, which far exceeded all she had heard of her escapades through Pierce, whom she secretly loved, and one day hoped to wed, when Coral, putting the finishing touch to her madness, outraged him to an extent that would impel him to sue for a divorce.

She was too cunning, however, to show the true state of her feelings, and assumed to be shocked at what she saw and heard; and on no account did she intend to remain for the festivities.

Coral showed no pleasure in the costly presents which Pierce had sent her, but threw them aside with a contemptuous gesture, saying:

"He still thinks me a school-girl! I wonder he did not send me a doll, labeled 'A present for a good girl!'"

"Really, Coral, you are incorrigible!" said Bell, laughing in spite of herself. "But how wonderfully you have grown! I declare I hardly knew you! Mr. Elthorp was pleased with the reports of your masters."

"Indeed! How gracious of his serene highness! Perhaps, if some one had taken the trouble to send me a report of his doings, I should not be so delighted as he appears to be."

This as she looked meaningly at her friend, who winced under the home-thrust.

Bell soon left Elthorp, carrying away with her the sweet conviction that Coral's downfall was near at hand; and by almost the next post after her return to town she wrote Mr. Elthorp

a charming letter, in which she described Coral's doings and sayings—so prettily, however, that no one could suspect that they had been penned with malice aforethought.

Meanwhile, Coral rushed on to seeming destruction; and when the performances were over, and Elthorp had returned to its normal state of repose, she realized for the first time what the consequences might be to herself.

With the willfulness so characteristic of her, she wrote her husband a letter in which she told him everything; how she had been treated by the aristocracy of the neighborhood, and inclosing cuttings from newspapers, and also a photo of her as *Rosalind* in full stage costume.

This to Pierce was the proverbial last straw that breaks the camel's back, and, aided by an anonymous letter and a paragraph in the *Morning Post* descanting on the recent fast doings at Elthorp, provoked him into writing an intemperate letter to her, charging her with more than folly, and apprising her of his speedy return to seek redress at the hands of the law.

Coral, stung to madness by her husband's unjust accusations, resolved to defy him; and in spite of her aunt's remonstrances, insisted upon taking up her abode on Lexington avenue, in the family town house.

"I am sick of Elthorp!" she exclaimed bitterly. "It has brought me nothing but unhappiness. I may never return to it; it will not break my heart if I do not."

So it came to pass that Elthorp was deserted, and Mrs. Elthorp and her aunt located in New York, where Coral launched out into all kinds of gayety and extravagance, and was usually chaperoned by her aunt, with Denton as *cicerone*, and Marochella as *aiddecamp* in waiting, provoking many comments from those who in their lifetime had done perhaps worse things, but not so openly.

She, poor, innocent girl! knew her own heart and purity of purpose, but never dreamed of the fearful construction the world puts where it sees a young and beautiful woman, separated from her husband, constantly in the society of a man who is known to be no relation to her to warrant his assiduous attentions.

CHAPTER VIII.

A TERRIBLE TEMPTATION.

To a proud, sensitive nature like that with which Coral was endowed, the scandal raised by her doings at Elthorp was most imbittering; especially as her object had been to do good and to raise funds for a well-deserving charity.

To be thoroughly ostracized by the neighborhood was another thorn in her side, which galled her all the more sorely because it had been brought about by the cruel neglect and indifference of her husband, to whom she had been ever since her marriage-day a wife in name, only treated as a mere school-girl to be kept under tutelage and scolded and lectured until her spirit rose in open rebellion, and she had been induced to do things which, in her calmer moments, she would have heartily regretted.

Many and many a night was her pillow wet with tears of mortification and deep humiliation

at his want of thought in exposing her to temptations while she was a mere child, untutored in the world's ways, surrounded by shoals and quicksands and snares that might in one reckless moment ruin her character for life.

Her aunt was altogether unfitted for the task of guarding one so self-willed and impulsive, in whose veins the warm blood of a Southern clime coursed madly when excited or thwarted; and if Pierce had not been so cold and indifferent, he must have seen that to leave a young and beautiful woman alone with all the freedom of a married life surrounding her, was to expose her to temptations before which few could stand.

"Why should I waste my life in waiting for his pleasure to come to me, when I might strike out a course for myself, and be happy in my own way? I have talents which I long to exercise; but when I do so I am met by the venomous tongue of scandal, and forced back upon myself, discouraged and despairing, with a lonely home, no society, and no hope of ever winning the respect, much less the love, of a husband whose great desire would seem to be to live separate from me, as if I were hateful to him; a something to be avoided, if not to be utterly discarded! How cowardly and mean it is of him to keep the chains riveted—those hateful bonds of marriage—instead of releasing me, and allowing each in turn to form fresh ties! I hunger for a home in which domestic bliss would be the chief feature! But when I ask for bread he gives me a stone; and in answer to my letters begging of him to return, he invariably says, 'Wait till your education is finished,' or, 'Obey me, and join me in Russia!' I am often tempted to throw off all semblance of allegiance to him and assert my thorough independence. And I mean to do so; perhaps it will bring him to his senses and to my feet, to sue for pardon."

Thus did Coral soliloquize one morning in her boudoir; her eyes lit up with the baleful fire of mortified pride and anger which filled her very being, making her lovely face distorted and unlovely, and filling her heart with a mad desire for retaliation.

When a woman, wealthy and beautiful and highly-gifted, finds herself treated with cold contempt and neglect by the man who has sworn to love and cherish and be all the world to her—a husband, friend, companion, counselor and guide—she is not likely to find vent for her wounded pride in useless sighs and tears, or to shut herself away from the world; no, that is just what she will not do, or ever has.

The standard of rebellion is raised, and she defies a power she cannot conquer, and, rushing madly upon fate, challenges it to a combat in which she invariably is defeated.

It was so in this instance; for, on running her eye mechanically down the long list of advertisements in the *Times*, she saw one especially addressed to aspirants for the stage, offering a leading position to a lady of ability and means in opera bouffe, an art in which her soul delighted.

"I'll do it," she said, almost fiercely; "and give him real cause for displeasure this time. The woman he wishes to banish into ignoble ob-

scourge will flash upon the world like a meteor, and display herself in public to amuse all who wish to see her. It will be a glorious revenge, and perhaps in his wrath he will free me from my fetters."

But her better angel had not quite deserted this rash, impetuous child of nature, in whose heart, hidden away under pride and anger and resentment, there blossomed the sweet flower of love for the very man she wished to abuse and humiliate.

Lying on the table was the withered spray of crimson azaleas which her husband had given her when they were boy and girl, and she had come to his home as an orphan from across many seas, and with which simple gift he had won her child's heart.

"Poor faded flowers!" she murmured, with tears in her dark, flashing eyes gathered there like dewy pearls. "You will never bloom again, but yet your memory is dear to me, and there is a fragrance even in your dead ashes, sweeter far than the odor of earth's choicest flowers, which appeals to my wounded heart and soothes it when everything else fails to do so. What is this? Can it be that my love for him, which I treasured up in secret for years, still has vitality? Oh, that I could scorn you, you memory of the past, as I do him; but you cling round the fibers of my heart and appeal to me to love him still, and to be patient and bear uncomplainingly his defection."

While she was warring with self there came a tap at the door, and her maid announced Marochella, the man to whom her warm, impulsive heart clung, because he was the embodiment of the art she loved so well—namely, music.

She swept into the drawing-room with the regal grace of a queen, and extending her hand to the gentle Italian, who loved the very ground she trod upon, but who was too noble to express his hopeless passion for her in words, she said, with a ring of gladness in her musical voice:

"I am so pleased you have come; I wished to see you on a matter I have in hand. Have you seen the advertisement in to-day's *Times* relating to the stage?"—this as she touched the bell for refreshments.

"I cannot say I have, dear madam; but if it interests you, I will not fail to pay attention to it."

"Oh, it does not matter! I have read it, and perhaps you will be surprised to hear I mean to offer myself as a candidate for the leading position offered in opera bouffe."

Taking her hand and leading her to a seat, he sat beside her, and said, "Coral, you have honored me with your friendship, and have placed me in the proud position of a brother. If I have any influence over you, I pray—nay, implore that you will not think of this project seriously. You are a wife, and hold a high position in society, and must not permit the world to assail you with the breath of scandal. It would break my heart if anything should happen to further estrange you from your husband!"

"You can be no true friend of mine to say that!" she exclaimed passionately, as she snatched her hand away. "Husband! wife!

What a mockery! Does he care one jot for me? No; and why should I guard his honor like a watchful jailer?"

"I am sorry I have offended you!" he said, gently. "Heaven knows I sympathize with you too much for that; but I would not be your friend if I stood by and permitted you to do anything the world would be sure to condemn without a word of advice. I am older in years than you, and my very profession brings me into contact with the world and its ways, and I have seen women lose fair fame when a man has passed unscathed for doing that which in comparison to her fault might well have been considered heinous crime. Bear with me, dear sister; your heart is sore, with perhaps just resentment. Why not end all this friction by joining your husband in Russia? I have a sister who will gladly, at my request, be your companion on the journey. Do this, Coral, for my sake, but for your own more especially."

"Forgive me for my harshness, Marochella. You are the dearest, truest friend I possess, and I would not willingly wound your noble heart; but you ask too much of me—a task which my woman's pride revolts at. It is too late to bridge over the gulf by making a bridge of my submission. He never tried to coax me, although he treated me as a child, and now it is war to the knife betwixt him and me. I am a child no longer, but a woman with a past to avenge, in which insult, disdain, and cold contempt have been heaped upon me unjustly. I thank you for having warned me against a project which could not but bring bitter reflection in its train, and I will for your sake abandon it; but, oh! let him not try me too far, or he may yet have a life-long sorrow haunting him like a grim specter, a *Banquo's* ghost at the feast!"

Marochella looked at her as she threw herself in her *abandon* of resentful despair on a couch, her beautiful arms placed under her dainty head, and her voluptuous form charming his every sense; and there came across his mind like a lightning flash a temptation unbidden, but still there, and terribly real, to wrestle no longer with his love for her, but avowing it on his knees, to implore her to make both herself and him happy, and throwing off her fetters, to fly with him to sunny Italy, and to be all the world to each other, instead of wearing out her young life in a battle against self, which must end in misery and hopeless despair. Hitherto he had placed a strong curb on his love; but to see her pain and listen to her repinings were more than flesh or blood could withstand, especially as he could perceive that he had gained a place in her affections and esteem.

Poor Coral, impulsive and reckless to a fault, but still pure in heart as the snow that covers with its white robe the sides of a crater, little dreamt of the storm which she had aroused in the man's heart who sat looking at her with love's delirium leaping from out of his eyes, devouring her every lineament, and mad with frenzy to clasp her to his heart, and plead with love's passion for a sacrifice which would make him, oh, so happy! and free her from her hateful bondage.

Had he spoken the words which surged to his

lips she might have said this fatal "Yes," for she was tired of the constant warfare, and wished, oh! so ardently, for peace and rest; but at this crisis in their lives, when two paths were open for them to tread—one narrow and rugged, but leading to safety and honor; the other broad and crowned on either side with flowers and shrubs tending to evil—Miss Elthorp entered, clothed in white, and looking like a sweet angel sent from heaven to save them; and the sound of her gentle voice broke the spell, and Marochella was saved, and in saving himself gave Coral safety too.

CHAPTER IX.

RECONCILIATION.

PIERCE, on his return to America, hastened to Elthorp, only to find the family gone to the city; and he feared lest Coral should have been driven into open rebellion by his reproachful letter.

It was late when he reached his city house, and he was told that his wife had gone to the opera with her aunt.

"Thank Heaven for that!" he said. "Aunt Clara will shield her from temptation. I fear I am to blame if any wrong has come to Coral, poor, misguided, willful girl!"

He went to the opera *incog.*, and took up a position whence he could observe his wife without himself attracting observation.

"How lovely she is!" he thought; "and her face bears the stamp of innocence upon it! She has fully justified the prophecy of my dear father. I never thought she would ever blossom into anything half so beautiful."

For the first time he realized that this glorious woman, with her superb form, flashing eyes, and statuesque face, beaming with bewildering, fascinating smiles, was his wife, who, from mere prejudice and pride, he had so long neglected.

The scales dropped from his eyes and he saw himself in a true light—that of an imperious, tyrannical, exacting husband, who had treated this superb creature as his vassal, not as his equal.

It maddened him to see how she smiled upon Denton, and how attentive he was to her; and his heart sunk within him lest she should already be lost to him forever, and that her undoing lay at his own door; and yet every day he had said those words in his prayers, "Lead us not into temptation," while he was driving her into the net of the fowler.

"I will wait till to-morrow," he thought, "and see her; perhaps she will forgive me, if it is not too late."

He went to his club that night, and about noon the following day he returned to his wife's address and saw his aunt Clara, who received him somewhat coldly.

"Are you not pleased to see me, aunt?" he asked.

"Yes, my brother's son is always welcome to me," she said with a look of reproach in her gentle eyes. "It is a pity you did not come before, Pierce."

"Good heavens! what do you mean?" he asked, wildly. "Where is my wife?"

"In her room."

"May I see her?" he asked, nervously.

"If you had treated her differently there would be no need for you to ask such a question. You have exposed her, an innocent girl, to great temptation, and armed society against her! Oh, Pierce! I can scarcely forgive you; how then can you expect her to welcome you? But I will be a peacemaker if I can. Go to her; sue her as a lover, not as a tyrannical, neglectful husband; and perhaps she may relent. Your last letter drove her almost mad! I could wish that I were lying beside your father, rather than that our name should be trailed in the very dust by your cruel treatment of a defenseless woman, and she your wife!"

He winced under these reproaches, and felt that they were only too well merited.

When Coral received his message she was in her boudoir waiting for her horse to be brought round, and she merely said:

"Tell Mr. Elthorp that I can only give him a few minutes of my time. Where is he, Barlow?"

"In the drawing-room, madame," the footman replied.

In a few seconds husband and wife stood face to face; she proud and haughty, and with scorn leaping from her eyes; he filled with varied emotions of admiration and abasement.

She looked radiantly lovely in her riding-habit, and yet, although she was his wife, he dared not even kiss her, for he saw how angry she was.

"Coral," he said, "have you no welcome for me?"

"If you come as my husband—no; but if as Mr. Pierce Elthorp—yes. I can say no more now. Good-morning, Mr. Elthorp, I have an engagement."

And with a sweeping courtesy, she turned away, her eyes flashing disdainfully.

"Coral," he said, softly, "do not go."

"Why not, Mr. Elthorp? You have had your way; surely you cannot object to my pleasing myself? I have not forgotten the insults you heaped upon me; if you remain here, I shall return to Elthorp until such time as you put your threat into execution. I long for my freedom! Good-day again!"

And she was gone, leaving him abashed, humiliated.

It was indeed a crushing defeat for him, who had been wont to treat her as a mere school-girl, to be scolded, but never petted, lest he should spoil her. The tables were turned upon him with a vengeance, and, to add poignancy to his self-abasement, he admitted the justness of her insulting indifference.

"How blind I was, how foolish to leave her alone, when I might have won her love! How she pleaded with me not to go, and I refused her prayer! What has ambition done for me? Lost me the great treasure of a wife's love! No woman who had the slightest taint upon her honor could look at me as she did. Oh, fool!—fool!"

In vain did her aunt plead for her forgiveness for her husband; Coral was obdurate, and would not even meet him, but kept to her own suite of rooms, while he yearned to see her, to hear her voice—for when too late, he had fallen desperately in love with his own wife.

Pierce Elthorp was a just and honorable man, despite his cold, proud exterior, and now that his conscience convicted him of wrong, he was ready to sue for pardon; but the golden gates of mercy seemed closed to him forever.

He watched her go out and in, hoping to catch a look of pardon from her glorious eyes; but although she knew he was at the window, she never deigned to notice him.

Then it occurred to him that Dinah, the poor despised quadroon, could mediate between them; but she replied: "You spurned my bird-ob-paradise, an' now she scorns you. Did I not tell you dat de day would come when you would lub her as she deserves to be lubbed? No, I cannot influence her. You must do dat for yourself, master."

One morning, full of a desire for reconciliation, he stole up to her rooms and entered an ante-room, where his attention was riveted by the sound of voices.

"Mr. Denton, you, like other men, are making a grave error in supposing that a wife, cruelly neglected and deserted by her husband, should fall a prey to the first man audacious enough to address words of love to her," Coral was saying.

"I only wish that you should gain your freedom from bonds that gall. I love you devotedly, and will make you—ah, with Heaven's help!—a happy wife. What has he done for you? Despised, scorned, and deserted you! Oh, Coral, you cannot love him! He has been so cruel!"

"I'll tell you what I have never said to him: I do love him, dearly, passionately! He was kind to me when I came to his father's home, an orphan, a stranger in a strange land. He gave me a spray of these, and I have kept it near my heart, although the flowers are withered, like his love. Leave me! I know you

mean what is right; but I can never be anything to you but a friend."

"Why, then, do you not tell him all this?" he asked, bitterly.

"Because I am a woman whose love he has scorned. My pride would never permit me to reveal my secret until he sued for pardon on his knees."

With hasty steps and a heart beating high with hope, Pierce entered, and throwing himself at her feet, clasped her hands, and said, "Coral, my darling, my true wife, you have won my love at last! Give me yours in return. I have been mad, foolish! See, I implore you on my knees to forgive me!"

Denton left husband and wife together, and she, raising Pierce, kissed him in token of loving forgiveness, and he clasped her to his heart, and rained down burning kisses on her lips, brow and eyes.

Elthorp is *en fete*, for a son and heir is born to the house, and father and mother are the happiest couple in all the Union, united now in the bonds of true love, which bad and would stand the crucial test of time.

Other children came to bless this bright, cheery home, and these little buds of promise were in great danger of being spoilt by Dinah and the gentle, silver-haired lady, their grand-aunt.

Bell Allingham never visits Elthorp, but Mr. Denton and Marochella do, and are received as welcome and honored guests.

One noticeable feature about Coral, whose beauty increases with the growth of years, and whose devoted husband, eschewing the thorny paths of ambition, has settled down in his home, is that the only flowers she ever wears is a spray of crimson azaleas.

THE END.

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